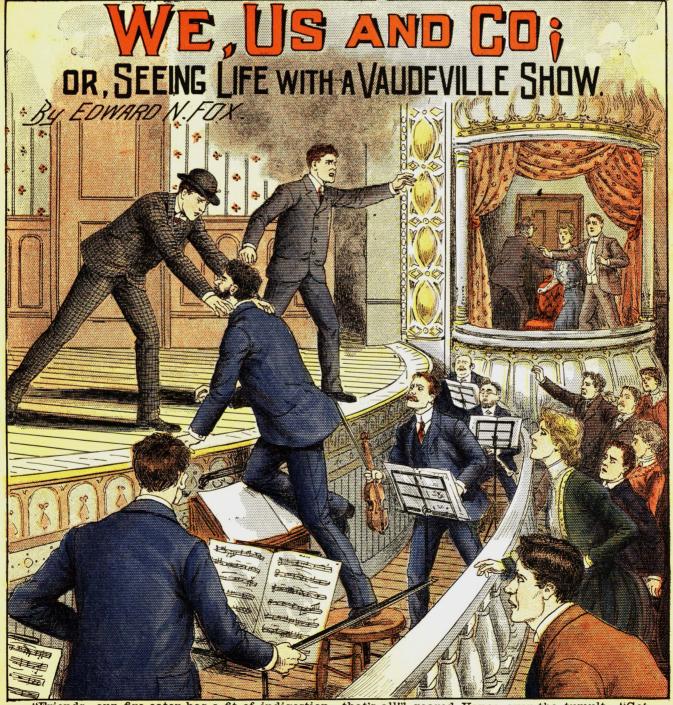
A COMPLETE V EVERY STORY / EVERY WEEK.



"Friends, our fire-eater has a fit of indigestion—that's all!" roared Vance over the tumult. "Get back—you're no doctor!" bellowed Slick, taking the cue and pushing the frantic leader back. Coolness in that perilous moment stayed the deadly panic.

WIDE AWAKE WEEKLY

A COMPLETE STORY EVERY WEEK.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1906, in the office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C., by Frank Tousey, Publisher, 24 Union Square, New York.

No. 10

NEW YORK, JUNE 22, 1906.

Price 5 Cents

WE, US & CO;

OR,

Seeing Life with a Vaudeville Show.

By EDWARD N. FOX.

CHAPTER I.

WE, US & CO. HAVE NOTHING TO EAT BUT AIR.

"Hullo, boys!"

"How do you do, sir?" responded one of the youthful pair.

The man of forty who had greeted the youngsters on the beach suddenly turned away from them.

Whipping out a handkerchief, this solemn-looking man applied it to his eyes.

Great sobs shook his rather bulky frame.

"Why, how have we hurt his feelings?" gasped Ted Roberts, in a stage whisper.

"Hanged if I know," returned Dave Thayer, wonderingly.

Still with the handkerchief at his eyes, the man said, brokenly:

"Boys, you wonder at this sudden emotion?"

"We certainly do," Ted affirmed.

"Boys, your kindness, so utterly unexpected, started this fount of tears."

"Then we take it all back," retorted Ted, drily.

But Dave, far more serious by nature, inquired:

"Kindness? What kindness did we show you?"

With his eyes still behind his handkerchief the solemn-looking man replied, chokingly:

"For three weeks I've been scoffed and jeered at, kicked and beaten, ordered about like a dog and made to sleep

in a stall at night. I've been starved and pummeled, roasted and frozen. My fellow-beings—and one in particular—have treated me as if I were nothing human."

Dave gasped, but Ted broke in:

"Aw, come off!"

"Fact, I assure you," gurgled the weepy one. "Now, I meet you boys, and speak to you—and what happens? You actually answer me pleasantly! More, vastly more than that. One of you—I can't remember which—addressed me as sir!"

Down came the handkerchief. The solemn-looking man was looking as solemn as ever, but in his eyes there was a queer bit of a twinkle.

"What kind of cod-fish balls are you trying to fill us up on?" demanded Ted, abruptly.

But Dave caught at his friend's arm, with an appealing gesture:

"Don't, Ted—don't. The mere mention of cod-fish balls reminds me how hungry I am."

reminds me how hungry I am."
"Hungry?" repeated the solemn-faced man, putting

away his not very clean handkerchief. "That proves it!" "Proves what?" Dave asked, innocently, while Ted

glared at the stranger.

"Proves what I had suspected," murmured the man. "If you can be hungry, then you are human after all, and not

angels sent down from the skies. Angels can subsist on

air—but, alas! we cannot!"
"Is he crazy?" wondered quiet Dave to himself.

But Ted came more swiftly to the point.

"Friend, if you're guying us," Roberts said, briskly, "you're having more fun than the lay-out warrants. We're hungry—hungry enough to eat baked elephant, if we could get it."

"I've got a bottle of appetizer about me," hinted the sol-

emn man, thoughtfully.

"Hold on! Our fix is too serious for even mild guying," Ted broke in. "Be serious, please, if you're not crazy. Stranger, being hungry, we want to eat. Being honest, we want to do some work for that meal. More than that, we want to lay our hands on a job that will give us three square meals a day right along."

"That introduces us," nodded Dave.

"Want a job, eh?" murmured the solemn man. "And I just threw one away!"

"You did?" Ted cried. "Where?"

"Over there," declared the solemn man.

He pointed to the big hotel structure that stood close to the beach, and less than a quarter of a mile away.

"What were you doing there?" Ted asked, in his straightforward, business-like way.

"Waiting on table."

"And gave up the job?"

"Well—er—you see, the boss asked me to give it up. Asked me to less than an hour ago, to be exact."

"I don't blame him," muttered Ted, "if you answered the customers the way you've been answering us."

"Maybe I did; maybe I did," assented the solemn one.

"Do you think there's a job left there?" broke in Dave, quietly.

"Didn't I tell you I left it there?" demanded the solemn one, with an injured look. "It was too heavy to carry away with me."

"I'm going on up there, and try for two jobs," declared Ted. "Come on, Dave."

All of a sudden the solemn-looking individual became serious.

"Wait a bit, boys," he suggested.

"Why?" queried Ted.

"Sit down, and I'll put you straight."

"Straight about what?"

"About the kind of a lay-out that place is."

"Oh," said Ted, doubtfully.

"It'll help you out a bit," the man 'assured him.

"Better listen, Ted," proposed Dave.

"That's right, boys," cried the solemn one, heartily. "Boys, I carry a queer front around with me. But I can sympathize with fellows who're hungry. I am, myself, in fact, at this moment. So sit down, and I'll tell you what you're up against at that hotel if you go for the job. There is just one kind of fellow who is needed over there at this minute."

"What kind?" Ted asked, after the three had seated themselves under a tree close to the beach.

"Boys, that place is an Adamless Eden."

"A-what?" came from puzzled Dave.

"A trouserless summer hotel. A place that has been jam-full of nice girls, but no nice men about, outside of the waiters, bell-boys and porters. It's been growing so dull up there that the girls can't stand it any longer. Yesterday a dozen of 'em left to go to some other place. Yesterday twenty more skipped, and the boss—Chesney, his name is—is growing frantic. At the present rate the hotel will be closed by Saturday night, and the summer not even half through. But you can't blame the girls. They've been raised to have fellows to talk to—fellows to tell 'em how sweet they look in their new frocks. Now, in a place like this, where there isn't a single fellow to look at them—why, they're going crazy. When the girls over at that hotel aren't crying they're reading time-tables and studying how to get away."

The solemn one made a grimace that caught Ted's attention.

"See here, stranger," blurted the boy, "you've been an actor."

"Sh!" warned the solemn one, looking stealthily around.

"And a comedian at that," followed up watchful Ted.

"Forget it, won't you? I ask it as my one last favor before I die of shame at being found out in this Adamless spot."

"You've been a good actor, too," guessed Ted. "What brought you down to this?"

"Can you keep a secret?" asked the solemn one, mysteriously.

"As well as the next one," Ted declared, promptly.

"Then—sh!—it was love, boys, that brought me to this!"
"Love of booze?" suggested Ted, crisply.

The actor started, as if Ted Roberts had hit somewhere near the truth.

Yet he replied, slowly:

"No; the love of a fair girl. I saw her, and was vanquished. I followed her, and saw her installed in that hotel yonder. A true lover should serve. I enrolled myself as a waiter. Then how I did serve her! All the delicacies of the kitchen I got my hands on and heaped upon her plate. She smiled upon me—for this sea makes one hungry."

"Don't remind us of that," begged Dave, wistfully, folding both hands tightly over an empty stomach.

"But I have lost my position," half-sobbed the actor.
"With it goes life, too, since I can no longer pass the beloved an extra plateful of charlotte russes."

"Stop that!" ordered Ted, picking up a stone and aiming it. "If you mention food again, without producing some, I'm going to brain you!"

"Hold on, gentlemen! Be calm!" interposed a laughing voice.

Another boy, who had been listening, stepped forward out of the background.

"I couldn't help overhearing you," he said, smilingly. "And pardon me if I repeat a miserable word when I overheard you say that you were hungry."

Ted sat up, looking at the new-comer with interest.

This new-comer was dressed in a faultless suit of clothes, pressed to perfection.

His linen and tan shoes were faultless. On his shapely young head, over the brown hair, sat a natty, up-to-date straw hat.

"Vance Dalton, gentlemen, at your service!" announced the new-comer, lifting his hat and bowing.

"Glad to know you, Dalton," acknowledged Ted, jumping up and holding out his hand, which was grasped by Dalton.

"Glad to know you, too," replied Vance, pleasantly. "I heard you mention the mere fact of having appetites. Gentlemen, that's exactly my own plight. Suppose we get together to solve the question?"

The other three were staring at Vance Dalton now, with a good deal of interest.

They scented some kind of an invitation from this well-dressed youngster of seventeen.

"I'm as hungry as the rest of you," Vance went on, deliberately, as he seated himself on the ground. "Unfortunately, I haven't any more food-buying cash than I judge you to have. So, as we all seem to be of one mind and a common purpose, I move that we plan together."

"You broke?" demanded Ted, unbelievingly. "With those clothes?"

"These clothes," Vance replied, "were a gift from my boss, out of his own wardrobe, before we fell out. Unfortunately, we had trouble before I'd been with him long enough to have any pay coming to me. Yesterday he engaged me as valet, and fitted me out with these duds. This morning we had words, and he kicked me out with a quarter—which I spent for breakfast, and that was some time ago."

"Tell you what you can do for the next meal," hinted the actor. "With clothes like those run over to the hotel yonder, register, ask for a good room, and lay in one good meal, anyway, before they find you out."

"And then have some big, strong brute of a porter, who's used to slinging trunks, get in his work on me?" queried Vance, smilingly. "No, thank you. I've got to think of something more in my line."

"What is your line?" asked Dave, looking at Dalton with curious eyes.

"I'm a business manager—promoter."

"A pro-what?" stumbled Ted.

"Why, I organize great enterprises."

"I thought you said you were a valet," uttered Roberts, disgustedly.

"That was yesterday, fellows," Vance went on, easily.
"And before being a valet I was news agent on the trains."

"That's where you got your gift of gab, eh?" asked Ted.

"Yes; and the same gift cost me my job on the road. But that's another story, and a dead one," Vance went on, smilingly. "Didn't have much in the way of clothes, so I looked out for the job of valet. Got a job with Mr. Frederick Griscomb. I picked him out carefully for a boss, too, for I saw that his clothes would fit me. Of course he had

to rig me out decently with one of his own suits. After that I didn't care if he did fire me. But the row came a little sooner than I had expected. I would have liked one month's wages in my pocket."

"So would we," muttered Dave Thayer, ruefully.

"Oh, that's all right, now—now that you've met me," proposed Vance, cheerfully. "Do you know, I've rather taken a liking to the looks of the lot of you? You see how dead easy I got a new rig of clothes. I'll put some money in these clothes just as easy. And I think I can show you fellows how to do it, too. As for you"—turning to the solemn one, who was blinking thoughtfully—"I overheard you say you were an actor."

"Once, in my young and thoughtless days," admitted the solemn one.

"We'll ring the curtain down on all joshing now," broke in Vance, with a sudden seriousness of manner and a look of command in his eyes. "You're talking to the manager. Now, answer me straight. Your name, please?"

"Slick?" returned the solemn one.

"Whole name, please!"

"Sam-Sam Slick!"

"Good enough name for a comedian, whether it's a straight name or not," clicked Vance, in a business-like tone. "Now," to the other two boys, "introduce yourselves."

When this had been done, Vance demanded:

"Roberts, what could you do in the show line? Now, don't be modest!"

"I-I can sing some," hinted Ted.

"Try your voice, then—now. Give us something—your best. I mean it. One, two, three, sing!"

Ted Roberts rose. There was something compelling in Vance's quick manner.

Taking in a deep breath, Ted began to sing the "Suwannee River."

He sang that song of "the old folks at home" with a sweetness and a direct force that came mighty near drawing tears form these homeless waifs cast up on a summer beach.

"That's all right," nodded Vance, joyfully.

"It's more'n that," commended Slick. "Kid, with a voice like that I can teach you to make use of your voice."

"Now, what can you do?" Vance demanded, turning upon quiet Dave.

"Nothing," Dave replied, slowly.

"Nothing?" retorted Vance Dalton, scornfully. "I don't believe it! Why, a boy of seventeen who couldn't do anything would be useless in the world. He'd better get off it. I know you can do something, just as well as if you had told me the truth. Now, out with it, Dave Thayer!"

"Oh, I suppose I can do a few little tricks," Dave answered, modestly, pulling out a soiled little paper-covered

"Sleight of hand?"

"Some."

"Card tricks?"

- "A few-when I have the cards."
- "Chemical tricks?"
- "I know a few," Dave assented.
- "You can throw your voice-ventriloquist?"
- "Why, I used to be fair at that," Dave drawled.
- "And you're the boy that couldn't do anything!" sniffed Vance.

"Well, I got it all out of little books like this one," Dave confessed.

"Well, what of it?" demanded Vance, almost wrathfully. "Does that make you any less smart? It makes you all the more smart, for it shows that you have the brains to get out the good things that are in some books."*

Then Vance glanced quickly back at Slick.

"Play a banjo, I suppose?"

"When I have one."

"Either of you boys able to accompany on a banjo?"

"I can sorter pick out an accompaniment," Ted admitted.

"Why, we're getting on famously!" glowed Vance. "Fellows, we're a whole show in ourselves! We'll go into the vaudeville—"

The roll of wheels broke in on his utterance.

The little group under the tree at the roadside became silent as a buggy containing two men came near.

But Sam Slick presently found his voice enough to whisper:

"That stout man is Chesney, the hotel man."

Just then they heard Mr. Chesney say to his companion:

"Mason, it's alarming, the way my women guests are quitting the hotel, just because it's so dull this season. Why, I'd give a hundred dollars, this minute, to find a way of stopping the rush away from my place."

Out into the road stepped Vance Dalton, all smiles.

"Glad to hear you say that, Mr. Chesney!" the boy called out. "I'll take that hundred right now!"

CHAPTER II.

THE GREENEST "BARNSTORMERS" THE WORLD EVER SAW!

Mr. Chesney's gaze swept over solemn Sam and tattered Ted and Daye.

He would have looked away again, at once, had not Vance Dalton been in the picture, too.

Somehow Vance, with his bright, handsome face, his

*Many of our readers may be unaware that Frank Tousey publishes a long list of these valuable little hand-books on purpose for American boys who like to know how to do things. These hand-books are sold at ten cents apiece, and there are some twenty of them in all for young men who would like to fit themselves for careers on the stage, or for entertaining at home. "How to Do Tricks," "How to Become a Ventriloquist," "How to Do Second Sight," are among these many hand-books. Look over this list, and a new world of fun will be opened to you. Any one of these books on entertaining may be secured by sending ten cents to Frank Tousey, 24 Union Square, New York City.—Editor.

cheery smile, and his breezy, brisk way, made people think he was worth looking at.

"Here's your chance, Chesney!" laughed the hotel man's companion.

"What is this nonsense, anyway?" queried the hotel man, impatiently.

"That's just what it is—nonsense," Vance went on, seriously. "And nonsense, Mr. Chesney, is just what you need to keep your guests from going away. They're deadly dull—bored to death. They need amusement. Now, for tonight, just invite all your guests to our vaudeville performance, and they'll feel that new life has come into this dull old summer town. Your guests go away after seeing our show? Never! They'd wait over to see the next show the next day!"

"Is that your vaudeville company?" questioned Chesney, grimly, as he looked at the three rather downtrodden figures behind Vance.

"Yes, sir, and I've been shaking hands with myself over getting them together. I've just been rehearsing 'em a bit," Vance went on, rather cheekily. "Say, I was going to send to New York for people, but New York can keep its performers now. I've got the real material right in this little bunch!"

"Oh, rot!" growled the hotel man, picking up his lines to drive on again.

"But just wait until I've got through with my proposition, won't you? I can interest you, Mr. Chesney, if you'll give me two minutes more."

"Listen, old man," urged Mr. Mason.

"Thank you," acknowledged Vance, with a bow to Mason. "Now, Mr. Chesney, while thinking about getting a vaudeville show together, just by luck I stumbled upon the very people I wanted. They're great-simply great. Just think of a night of comedy, singing solos, quartettes, banjoplaying minstrelsy, sleight of hand, ventriloquism, magical illusions and some of the funniest stories you ever heard from the stage! And that's not all my new company can do, either. It would take too much time to tell you all. But take us up to the hotel. You've got some place where you give a show. Take us into that place. Let us show you what we can do. If we don't suit, you can kick us out instanter. But you won't kick-and your guests won't, either, when they see us and hear us. Now, then, isn't that fair? All we ask is a chance to make good. Then your guests will quit leaving you. No more dull times around here."

"If they're all as good as that youngster, they'll make good all right," whispered Mason to the hotel man.

"Well, then," said Mr. Chesney, grudgingly, "come on up to the hotel, and I'll see what there is in you."

Slick, Ted and Dave had been fairly mesmerized by Vance themselves.

Now, all four fell in behind the buggy, the horse proceeding at a walk.

"See that drab-colored building over there?" asked Chesney, reining up at the entrance to the hotel grounds. "We

used to use that place as a roller skating rink, when there were any young men here to skate with the young ladies. That can be rigged into a theatre. Suppose you go over there and wait a while for me? Just now I've got lunch on my hands."

"And, while you're about it, Mr. Chesney," proposed Vance, simply, "we might as well have our lunches sent over to the theatre. You wouldn't want us to mingle with your guests in the hotel."

"Glory! That bluff works!" muttered Ted, inwardly, after a moment's anxious watching of Mr. Chesney, who

nodded.

"Have the luncheon sent over right away, so we can begin to get ready for to-night, won't you?" suggested Vance.

. "You'll have it within half an hour," promised the hotel

"Say, is that the right way?" quivered Vance, after they had gone a few happy steps toward the drab building.

"You're our manager," nodded Ted. "But say, you've got to pull us out of an awful hole to-day. Outside of Slick, anyway, we'll be rotten."

"And you've yet to learn how rotten I can be on the stage," sighed Sam, dolefully.

The door of the old skating rink was open. They went inside, in all the silence and desolation, and found seats on two settees in there.

"Now, we've got to scratch sense," sighed Sam. "This show business is a serious game, after all. We can't do without make-up, for one thing."

"And I've got to have some stuff for my tricks," confessed Dave.

"Let's see all the things we do need," suggested Vance, brightly, taking out pencil and paper.

He jotted them down as they were called off-burnt cork, rouge, swansdown, vaseline, grease paints, chemicals for Dave, and many other things.

Some of the things Vance noted was to be furnished by the hotel.

Among these were two banjos.

"It's going to cost about six dollars," gasped Ted, at last; "and we haven't a cent in the crowd."

"Get some money advanced by Chesney?" hinted Sam Slick.

"No, sir!" vetoed Vance, promptly. "If he found I hadn't any money, he'd put me down for a fakir. I don't want Chesney to find that or just yet. Hullo! Here comes the grub. After we get the I'll get the things we need-somehow."

Gracious! Didn't that food look and to four hungry mortals?

Three waiters bore as many trays, and then, left by themselves, the four hungry ones made a quick assault upon the supplies.

"And now I'm up and off," cried Vance, rising. "I'll bring back the things we need. Never fear! If Chesney to send over from the hotel the things I've written down here for him to furnish."

Vance was off like a shot. He seemed to do everything swiftly, for, by the time Chesney had produced two banjos from among the hotel guests, and was listening to some clever playing by Slick, young Dalton was back with bun-

"Now, just give us an hour or so, Mr. Chesney," hailed Vance, "and we'll be ready to make good before you. We've got a lot to do in that hour."

"I'll come back, with a very critical young lady," smiled the hotel man, then turned and walked out.

"My, how on earth did you get all these things?" gasped Ted, as Vance began to undo the bundles.

"Oh, and I've got cash, too," laughed Vance, displaying some money.

Then, with almost a choke in his voice, he added:

"Fellows, I had just one asset in the world—a rather good watch that my dead father used to own. I took it to a jeweler and raised ten dollars on it. I've got to buy it back to-morrow for twelve, or it will be gone."

"Let's have some of those tricks, youngster," Sam demanded, turning upon quiet Dave Thayer.

Dave gathered up some of his belongings, including things that had been sent over from the hotel, and disappeared into the rink office and closed the door.

In a surprisingly short time Thayer had the door open again.

He had rigged up the table for his work.

"Stand back there!" he cried. "Don't come too close. Now, then, here's a rather simple trick. Here, you see, I have two empty goblets. I place one, upside down, on top of the other. Now, I cover them over with this cloth—so. Now, I light this cigar, get it going good—and watch what happens."

Dave had stepped a dozen feet away from the covered glasses. Several whiffs of smoke he blew toward the glasses, then put the cigar down.

Stepping over to the table he quickly lifted the cloth from the glasses, pulled the goblets apart, and a veritable cloud of thick, white smoke came from the glasses.

"Say, that's good," admitted Vance. "How do you do it?"

"Easily enough," smiled Dave. "You see, the bottoms of these goblets go down to a point. Now, in the bottom of one goblet I pour just a couple of drops of ammonia water. In the other I pour a couple of drops of muriatic acid. The ammonia trickles down into the acid, and there's a big white cloud forms—see? But before that has time to happen I have the cloth over the glasses."

It was a splendidly effective trick, simple as it was.

Picking up a pack of cards, Dave held out one of the pasteboards.

"Name the card," he desired.

"Two of diamonds," replied Vance, quickly.

Dave turned the card over, with the face toward the comes, tell him I'm off after outfit. Sam, you get him floor. Then swift as thought he turned the card up again. "Nine of spades? Good! That's real lightning change."
"Will you oblige me by returning that Jack of clubs
that you hid in your left-hand coat pocket?" requested
Dave, turning to Slick.

Sam felt, and sure enough produced the card.

"That's all right," murmured the old-time actor.

"Well, naow, it's dod-gasted slick, I tell yeou!" drawled a voice from out in the rink.

Vance, Ted and Slick turned like a flash, then glanced quickly back again—sold. Dave had been showing them what kind of a ventriloquist he was.

"Here's another simple little thing," proposed Dave, holding up a plate. "Get back a bit. Now, as you see, I have a little heap of chips on this plate. I'll show you how to start a fire without matches."

From behind the table he picked up a glass rod. One end of this he touched against the splinters of wood.

Flare! There was a miniature fire burning on the plate. "Say, that's a good deal like," admitted Ted. "Get that out of your book?"

"Sure thing," nodded Dave. "First time I've tried the trick, too. It's easy enough. Under the chips you put about a half a teaspoonful of powder made by mixing equal parts of chlorate of potash and powdered sugar. You want to buy that chlorate of potash already powdered, though. If you get the lumps and try to grind 'em up you'll have an explosion sure. Now, I had this glass rod just resting in a bottle of sulphuric acid. When I picked up the rod there was just a little of the stuff sticking to it. I touched that end to the powder and the minute the acid touched the powder there was a blaze. Oh, these tricks are all easy enough, you see."

"When you have the book," Ted assented, drily.

"Say, we're going to give this show, all right," glowed Vance.

"May we come in?" hailed a voice. Mr. Chesney appeared, followed by his friend Mason.

But with them was a girl of sixteen, so pretty that, for a minute, Vance forgot all about business.

He recovered himself quickly, though.

"Now, go on and show us what you can do," requested the hotel man, with a commanding wave of one hand.

"He isn't going to introduce me to her," thought Vance.
"Well, I can't say that I blame him. He doesn't know
me from any other tramp."

Dave closed the office door, behind which he began to arrange for several of his tricks.

Sam Slick filled the gap by getting out into the middle of the rink floor. He sang some of his best songs, told some of his funniest stories and did many of his really great clog steps.

"I understand why you weren't much good as a waiter," laughed Chesney. "An actor never is any good at anything else."

"But he's all right as an actor, eh, sir?" asked Vance, going nearer to the hotel trio.

"He's really, wonderfully clever," cried May Chesney,

favoring Vance with a smile so pleasant that young Dalton was her slave from that moment.

Ted sang some songs, among them "Suwannee Ribber." Sam joined in some of the choruses.

Then Dave, very shyly, opened the office door, ready to show his work.

It was good, and brought hearty applause from Mason and Miss May.

"Do you know how he does these wonderful tricks?" murmured May Chesney, looking up into Vance's eyes.

"I have an idea about some of them," our hero answered. "You'll tell me how some of these clever tricks are done, before you're through with your engagement here, won't you?" she begged.

"I surely will."

"May!" called her father, and the girl, flushing just ever so little, moved from Vance's side over to Mr. Chesney.

Taking the hint, Dalton drew back some distance.

"And may I come in?" hailed a voice from the outer doorway.

Vance turned, his heart giving a great thump.

There in the doorway stood a young man of twenty-five, though no bigger than our hero. The new-comer, though he had a dissipated-looking face, was a mirror of fashion.

"Frederick Griscomb—the fellow who fired me this morning!" thrilled Vance. "Talk about hard luck! He'll tell them I'm his discharged valet and it'll be all over with my pretending to be anything else!"

Vance got a swift glance at the girl's face. May had turned first white, then scarlet. Her eyes ashed scornfully as she glanced at Griscomb.

Mr. Chesney, too, glanced at the new-comer as if he did not relish seeing him there.

But Griscomb, not a bit abashed, stepped forward until he caught sight of quivering Vance.

"Why, hullo!" cried Griscomb. "Mr. Chesney, have you hired Dalton?"

"Dalton," replied the hotel man, "is the manager of a vaudeville company that is to give a performance here tonight."

"Theatrical manager, eh?" gasped Griscomb. "He moves quickly, then. This morning he was my valet, but I discharged him for being worthless. I gave him that suit of clothes he's wearing."

"Mr. Dalton has one you good point," broke in May Chesney, coldly, clearly ingly. "He has the advantage of seeming to be nan."

"Which mean queried Griscomb, starting back and loking flurria."

"Mr. Griscomb," broke in Chesney, coming to his daughter's aid, "we are really here on a matter of hotel business. Won't you excuse us?"

"Oh—ah—er—certainly!" returned Griscomb, gasping and paling.

Then suddenly, very red, this young man of wealth turned and made for the door.

"Thank you very much—all of you," was all May Chesnev had a chance to say when the "try-out" was finished.

She went away with Mr. Mason, leaving Vance to reflect:

"So my boss of yesterday is sweet in that quarter? If Miss May needs any one to post her on what kind of a scoundrel Griscomb is, I'm the chap to do it. But neither she nor her father seem to waste any interest on Griscomb."

Mr. Chesney remained. He came toward Vance now.

Our hero, remembering quickly the importance of this business, asked in a tone from which he tried to hide his anxiety:

"Well, Mr. Chesney, how do you like our show?"

"Want the truth?" smiled the hotel man.

"Yes, sir. Just what we want."

"In my opinion, Dalton, you're about the greenest lot of barn-stormers the world ever saw!"

"Oh, oh, oh!" gasped startled Vance, who had been rather proud of his little "company."

Then, his cheek coming back to him, he retorted:

"But wait until you've seen us on the regular stage tonight. Then you'll change your mind. By the way, Mr.
Chesney, my people will have to borrow a little in the way
of clothing for to-night. They—er—er—look a little
shabby in their present garb, and they will, until their first
salaries come in under the new management. And speaking of salaries, Mr. Chesney, reminds me that we've yet
to make our terms. You said you'd give a hundred dollars
to stop this rush from the hotel. That's just our price—
a hundred dollars for a two-night's performance here.
And—"

Vance and Mr. Chesney passed from the rink, leaving Slick and the others behind.

"A manager, eh?" chuckled Sam Slick. "Boys, with a manager like that, if we get out of this first hole, we'll be wearing fur-trimmed overcoats and diamonds by the time that snow flies!"

CHAPTER III.

HEROISM LANDS VANCE IN A FEARFUL FIX!

Night time had come, and with it the first show that We, Us & Co.—as Vance had dubbed the "company"—ever gave.

From the basement of the rink building carpenters had brought up the parts of a stage and put them together.

There was a curtain, too, and some scenery—mighty little of it, but enough to set a stage.

Sam Slick had taken hold vimfully as stage manager and had got the stage to rights.

Now, most important of all, supper had been sent to them in the rink, and, with this inside of them, We, Us & Co. faced the night's ordeal.

There were nearly four hundred people in the house.

In addition to the hotel guests Chesney had invited many of the villagers and neighboring farmers. While the audience gathered the hotel orchestra of five pieces played lively music.

Sam was busy arranging the three "character costumes" he had faked up out of old clothing borrowed from the hotel people.

Dave was half-way resplendent in a dress suit loaned him by a waiter of his own size.

Ted was in another dress suit.

Both boys were ill at ease. "Stage fright" was beginning to get its grip on them.

"Now, keep cool, for gracious sake," Vance begged, anxiously. "If we can get through a night here without being goats, we're started on our careers."

"There ain't nothing to be scared of, fellows," Sam assured them, as he made up before a mirror in the wings.

A quarter of an hour later the signal went for the opening quartette. This all four sang, and with Ted's strong, sweet voice leading, the effect was good.

There was a friendly encore from in front. The quartette responded with a rollicking college song.

Then, with more applause sounding, Vance Dalton stepped before the curtain.

His first feeling, as he faced those hundreds of pairs of eyes, all turned upon him, was one that made his knees shake under him.

But he shook off the stage fright.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, in a voice that was faint at first, but which grew stronger as he went along, "I congratulate you most heartily upon the fact that you are about to be entertained by the one whom I regard as the funniest fellow alive. I am speaking, of course, of Mr. Sam Slick, the greatest comedian who—"

And so Vance went on to the end of his speech.

Click! Click! To slow, doleful music, Sam hobbled out on crutches. One look at that solemn face of his, rendered ridiculous by absurd make-up, set the audience in a starting roar.

Instantly Sam tossed his crutches into the wings.

"Thanks, fellow citizens," he began. "I had stage fright, and couldn't stand without help. But that laugh settles it; I see that you mean to take me good-naturedly. Now, don't laugh any more, please, or I shall get rattled and forget what I'm here for."

That, with one look at Sam's grotesquely-blinking eyes, sent another titter through the house.

"Now, we'll get down to serious thought," he went on.
"I'm something of a fellow for figures—especially when
the girl is young! Speaking of figures, what's the easiest
way to divide nineteen apples evenly among seventeen people?"

Sam looked solemnly at the audience, his eyes again blinking.

"That's right," he said. "Don't all answer at once and get me rattled. But can't anybody answer? Shall I tell you the easiest way to divide ninteen apples evenly among seventeen people? Make apple sass!"

Crash! went the orchestra in a discord. The folks were

laughing. Sam had them going. Rising on tip-toe, he ning here about every night, I can keep my boarders interbellowed out above the laughter:

"What's the one sure way to catch a squirrel? What? No hunters here to tell us that? Listen! The easiest way to catch a squirrel is to climb up a tree and make a noise like a nut. Then-"

But Sam didn't have to go any further. He had caught the audience with this style of nonsense.

He told a few funny stories, then stopped, after a bigger laugh than usual from the folks out front.

"Is there a farmer in the audience—a real farmer, I mean?" he queried. Then he paused, looking around.

There were several sure-enough farmers out there. One couldn't mistake them, either.

"Won't some farmer please rise?" insisted Sam Slick.

One middle-aged man, after much urging from those around him, stood up.

"You're a farmer?" asked Sam.

"Er-er-ye-es," admitted the man, in a faint voice, and growing very red.

"You farm for a living?"

"Er-yes." The farmer was becoming more and more rattled, with the eyes of half the people in the house fixed on him.

"Then, as a farmer," begged Sam, "answer me this conundrum: What's the difference between an onion and a cabbage?"

Looking as if he would like to sink through the floor, the red-faced farmer remained silent.

"Don't you know the difference between an onion and a cabbage?" Sam insisted, sternly.

"No-o-o," gasped the farmer, faintly.

"Just listen to him!" Sam Slick fairly bellowed, appealing to the audience. "He admits that he doesn't know an onion from a cabbage! And yet a bird like that calls himself a farmer!"

"Whoop!" It was on the farmer with a vengeance. The audience nearly choked in its laughter, while the farmer sank down as close to the floor as he could get. Before the laughing had stopped the orchestra was playing something lively and Sam was hard at his step-dancing.

Then came Ted in some sentimental songs.

After that he and Slick did a banjo duet.

Dave Thayer had the audience pleased with forty minutes divided by magic and ventriloquism.

Sam got to the front with more nonsense, and then came Dave with a half-dozen clever card-tricks.

It wound up with sweet-voiced Ted singing "Home, Sweet Home" to the soft accompaniment of the orchestra.

There were many wet eyes as that true young voice sang.

But the applause was what counted.

Vance, in the meantime, had hurried to the front of the building.

There, as the people were coming out, he met Chesney.

"Were we really so worse?" smiled Vance.

"Not half bad, my boy, after all," admitted the hotel man. "I've made up my mind that, if I keep shows run-

ested enough to remain."

"We'll play every night, then," Vance promptly offered. "That would surely be a little too much of one thing," laughed Chesney. "But you can play again to-morrow night, if you can change the bill a little."

"My people can do anything," Vance declared, promptly.

"And later on you can have a return date of a couple of nights," hinted Chesney. "As for now, I suppose you'd like to-night's fifty dollars. Come to the hotel office, and I'll pay you."

"Just one moment, first, sir. Where does my company sleep for to-night?"

"Oh, I'll send cots out to the rink. That'll do, won't it?" "It's a little bit rough on high-grade theatrical people,"

grimaced Vance. "But I suppose it will have to do."

What a different world it seemed when he receipted for that fifty dollars and carefully tucked the money away in his pocket!

"You'll find the cots there by the time you get back to your company," hinted Mr. Chesney. "Good-night, Dalton, and thank you all for trying hard."

Thus dismissed. Vance strolled back to the rink.

The cots were there, and his performers, feeling tired, were already undressing.

So Vance strolled out again into the open.

Things were quieting down in the hotel. One after another the guests' lights were going out.

Not far from one end of the front veranda of the hotel was a clump of flowering bushes, behind which was a settee.

On to this Vance sank.

"By Jove, I really believe I have struck something," he murmured, delightedly, to himself. "I always thought I could do business if I got a chance. And now the chance seems to have made itself. If there really is business blood in me, it will crop out."

Vance was the only son of a man who had once been well known in the business world of a large American city.

Vance's mother had died when he was very young.

Father and son had gotten along very much like chums. Two years before, however, John Dalton, like many another successful American business man, had run afoul of a trust.

Dalton had been crushed by the trust, had finally lost his property, and the disaster had killed him.

Vance, without money, and too proud to seek it from friends, had stepped out into the world to do for himself.

Nor had the task been an easy one.

First of all, he had secured a job as office boy. His pay barely kept body and soul from parting company.

Then, in rapid succession, he had been assistant to a shipping clerk, clerk, time-keeper, clerk in a telegraph office, and finally, for a few hours, valet to Fred Griscomb.

The latter had met our hero in the city, had taken something of a fancy to the boy, and had engaged him as valet.

But Vance had hardly begun with his employer when

he discovered that he would be wanted more for questionable services than for work as a real valet.

"I need a slick article, a fellow who ain't over nice about some things, and who knows how to tell a lie well," Griscomb had laughingly informed the boy.

Vance, as soon as he found out that this was the truth, had flared up. Then came the quitting, and the boy was out in the world, with a good suit of clothes, but without money.

Vance had always had a notion that he could do well in business for himself if he could but get a chance for a start.

Overhearing the conversation between Slick, Ted and Dave, he had instantly formed the decision to start a vaude-ville show with this small amount of doubtful material.

Had Vance had any knowledge at all of the theatrical business, he would have kept out of the venture. There is no other line of enterprise in which managers fail as often as they do in the theatrical line.

It is better to be a performer than a manager with little or no capital—but Vance didn't know that.

So far, since the death of his father, Vance Dalton's life had been without a real object.

But now he had his company, to stand or fall with—and he had seen May Chesney.

Even Vance might have scoffed at the notion that he had fallen in love with her at first sight, but the fact remained that, already, she exerted a wonderful influence on him. He would have given worlds to stand well in her good graces.

Now, as he strolled through the grounds late at night, he caught sudden sight of her.

Still dressed in her evening frock, the girl stood on the balcony over the veranda.

Gazing dreamily into the distance, she looked the picture of sweet, wholesome beauty.

"Getting the air because it's too warm to sleep," murmured the boy. "But why is she all alone at this hour?"

She was looking away from him, so Vance stood, stockstill and silent, watching her in boyish adoration.

But suddenly she turned, saw him, and started.

Reddening, feeling as guilty as a thief, Vance would have hurried away. But she called down, softly:

"Is that you, Mr. Dalton?"

Vance nodded. Something queer got into his throat to prevent his speaking clearly.

"You are tired, after the night's work, I suppose?" she called down, so softly that the boy had to go closer to the veranda to answer without risk of disturbing sleeping guests.

"Yes," he replied, thrilling, as he looked up into her eyes. Truth to tell, he didn't know, just then, whether he was tired or not.

"It must be a hard life, after all?" she asked.

"Ye-es," Vance replied, doubtfully.

Then she laughed softly, her eyes brimming over with mirth.

"Mr. Dalton, the tone of that reply makes me sure of what I had guessed—that you are wholly new at managing a vaudeville show."

What was there to do but tell the truth? Vance admitted that her guess was right.

"How came you to go into such a business, then?" was her next question.

"The need of something to eat," the boy answered, honestly.

"Oh!" Then, after a pause: "Wait. I am coming down."

Would wonders never stop happening? May Chesney coming down to chat with him.

"I am waiting for papa. I nearly always do," she remarked, as she appeared on the lower veranda and walked toward him without shyness. "Papa always makes a round of the hotel, the servants' building, the stables and the grounds before he goes to bed for the night. He will be here at any minute now."

"It's good of you to come down and talk with me," murmured Vance, gratefully.

"Is it?" she smiled. "It's because I'm interested."

Interested in him? Vance felt as if he were in the seventh heaven of delight!

"Yours is such an interesting calling," she explained.
"Do tell me more about yourself."

Then, almost before he realized it, Dalton had told the girl nearly everything that there was to be told about himself.

But she smiled disagreeably when he mentioned the name of Griscomb.

"He's a most detestable fellow," May cried.

"That's the truth," Vance nodded.

"He tries to inflict his friendship upon papa and me," she went on. "We discourage him all we can."

Then she quickly changed the talk to other topics.

"That must be papa now," May murmured, looking off into the darkness.

"I'll go now," Vance replied. "Miss Chesney, you won't think me fresh if I say that talking to a girl like you—talking to just you, I mean—makes the whole day seem brighter?"

"Does it?" she answered, frankly. "Then I'm very glad."

"May I have a little talk with you to-morrow, Miss Chesney, if there is a chance?"

"Why not?" was her reply, as she looked into his eyes.

"Th-thank you," murmured Vance, and, lifting his hat, he walked away after he had said good-night.

Vance's rapid steps once more carried him by that clump of bushes.

Here he halted, screened from her observation, and turned to look back at the girl standing there.

She was still on the lower veranda and must have been in error about her father coming, for Mr. Chesney had not appeared. "I won't try to go back, but I'll stay here and watch her as long as she remains out," mumbled the boy.

So he sat once more on the bench, devouring her with his eyes through the little spaces between the leaves.

As he sat there, he heard the rumble of a cab's wheels on the road just below, but he paid no attention.

Fred Griscomb was in that cab, with two reckless companions.

All of them had been drinking rather heavily, and were now in a mood for anything. The driver on the box was a fellow of their own stripe.

"By Jove," whispered Griscomb, suddenly, "there's the pretty May all alone on the veranda at this hour of the night."

"Waiting for some fellow she likes better than you, Fred," leered one of his companions.

Griscomb uttered an oath.

"Fellows," he muttered, savagely, "we could spoil sport by carrying the young jade off bodily."

"You wouldn't dare, Griscomb!"

"I wouldn't?" he flared. "If I had the right kind of fellows with me I'd do it in a second. If I carried her off, she'd have to marry me. She couldn't go home until she did."

"Oh, if it's us you're afraid of," jeered one of the trio, "we'll see you through!"

Griscomb lurched heavily toward the trap that communicated with the driver. In a few seconds that worthy had his orders.

May did not start, or wonder, as the cab rolled up to the veranda. Some guests out late, she supposed.

Then, suddenly, three forms tumbled out of the cab. She felt herself seized.

"Help! help!" she screamed.

All in a twinkling Vance was on the scene. He struck out, knocking Griscomb down. May fled to the veranda, while Dalton turned his attention to another roysterer.

All four were now mixed up in a wild scrimmage.

"Dalton, I'll teach you better!" muttered Griscomb, thickly.

Crack! A pistol had been fired, and Vance was on the ground.

"What's all this?" roared Mr. Chesney, rushing up. A dozen employes and male guests were on the scene in a jiffy.

Then Fred Griscomb, suddenly sobered by the shock, became crafty enough to pretend to be badly intoxicated.

"Won't some one please look after my (hic) valet?" he moaned, thickly, while Chesney shook him angrily. "Poor feller—my valet. He got hurt. And he was (hic) doing beautifully here, too. Just pretended I'd fired him, and he (hic)—oh, you're slickest fellow out, Dalton! Awful sorry you (hic) got hurt!"

"What's that?" roared the horrified Chesney. "May, how did you come to be down here?"

"Why, I stepped down, papa, to talk with Mr. Dalton," Chesney.

replied the girl, whose own eyes had suddenly opened very wide.

"That's wonderful (hic) boy!" nodded Griscomb, with a pretense of drunken gravity.

"This young pirate was sent here on purpose to decoy my daughter down to the veranda at this late hour!" bellowed Chesney.

Letting go of Griscomb, the infuriated father leaped at Vance Dalton.

CHAPTER IV.

VANCE IN THE TOILS.

Vance had been mentally stunned, first of all, at finding himself so unexpectedly wounded.

Then, as he lay on the ground, and heard the lying words of Griscomb, he felt as if the world had turned upside down.

But that was mild compared with his feelings when May Chesney seemed so readily to suspect him of a guilty part in the attempted outrage.

So he did not dodge, or try to get out of the way when May's father bounded at him.

It was Mr. Mason who thrust the angry parent back.

"Careful, Chesney. That boy has been shot!"

"He ought to be!" roared the hotel man, striving desperately to get past his friend.

"Oh, papa, be careful!" pleaded May, darting in unopposed, and kneeling beside the boy.

"Get away from him, May!" commanded her father. "Mason, let go of me."

"When you're yourself enough to act like a sane man, I'll let go of you," returned Mr. Mason, coolly.

"Are you badly hurt?" May asked, softly, then uttered a cry as she saw a pool of blood near Vance's left thigh.

"Hurt in my feelings, worse than anywhere," quivered Vance. "Miss May, I didn't have anything to do with that wretch, Griscomb. I was looking at you from the distance. I saw what was happening, and rushed forward to help you. Then Griscomb shot me."

"Are you telling me the strict truth, Mr. Dalton?" May demanded.

"As heaven is my judge," the boy answered, fervently. "You will believe me, won't you?"

"I—I want to," replied the girl. "But you are hurt, and must be attended to."

"I don't believe it's much of anything," Vance objected, trying to rise.

Mason, who seemed to have the coolest head of any of them in this crisis, gave a hand to help the boy to the veranda.

Vance had been shot through the fleshy part of his left thigh. A physician who was stopping at the hotel made haste to lead the boy into the office.

"Don't let Griscomb and his crew get away," bellowed

But Griscomb and his friends had already fled. The cab had gone off, too, unnoticed in the excitement.

"Better let 'em go, and have done with it," Mason quietly advised his friend, the hotel man. "The fellows were drunk, and it'll only make a lot of unpleasant talk about May."

"We've got the boy, anyway," growled Chesney.

"And you want to act like a civilized man," retorted Mason. "There isn't a bit of proof against the boy, except the word of drunken Griscomb. Are you going to hang the boy on Griscomb's say-so?"

After driving some of the curious guests out of the office the doctor, with the help of two of the hotel employes, examined and bandaged Vance's wound.

"It didn't touch the bone, boy," said the medical man. "You'll be all right in a few days, except that you may have a stiff leg."

"I hope it ain't stiff enough to keep him from getting off these grounds to-night," raged Chesney, who had just come in.

"It will be," said the doctor, severely. "It would be inhuman to send this boy away to-night."

"Besides, sir, we've got the show for to-morrow night," appealed Vance, looking eagerly at the hotel man.

"To-morrow night?" sniffed Chesney. "Do you think I'm going to have you and your crew here any longer. Show to-morrow night? Huh! You'll be giving your show in the police station!"

"Do you mean to have Dalton arrested?" whispered Mason.

"Do I mean to have him arrested?" roared Chesney. "After trying to help that gang abduct my daughter? I should say I would have him arrested!"

Vance's face went white as chalk, while the hotel man strode toward the door.

"If he does have you arrested, and doesn't make his charge good," whispered a young law student in Dalton's ear, "then you'll have a fine case against Chesney for damages."

But Mason was already giving this same opinion to Chesney outside, with the result that the hotel man's wrath was cooling a good deal.

May had disappeared. One after another the guests and employes went back to their beds.

"Your quarters are out in the rink building, aren't they?" asked the medical man. "Well, try now, and see if you can walk there, leaning on my arm."

Vance accomplished the walk.

Slick, Ted and Dave, who had slept through the excitement, were astounded when they were aroused and told what had happened.

"It's fearful luck," moaned Vance. "Just when we seemed to be making a start to do well. We've got to leave in the morning."

"Oh, well, we've got some of the long green to take away with us," grinned Slick. "And I've heard of worse luck in the show business."

The leg pained and throbbed a bit. Vance hardly slept through the night, but his three new friends were kindness itself in looking after him.

Their breakfast came out to them, that morning, as if nothing had happened. So, too, came the doctor, who refused to take any pay for his work.

"You gave me a good show last night. I'll give you a fair show now," laughed the doctor.

Ted went into town early, and got Vance's watch out of pawn.

Chesney had not relented in the least.

He still insisted that We, Us & Co. must leave the hotel grounds at once.

"Letter for Mr. Dalton," announced one of the hotel waiters, showing in the doorway of the rink building when We, Us & Co. were alone by themselves just before the start. "Here!" cried Vance.

The waiter stepped up to him, handed him a bulky envelope, and, turning, hurried out again.

"Whew! It must be a long letter," gasped Vance, observing the bulk of the envelope's contents.

He tore one end off the envelope, then vented a cry of astonishment.

"We live again, for the long green's in sight!" Sam Slick solemnly announced.

For Vance, sitting there dumbfounded, stared at a rather thick wad of banknotes, surrounded by a single sheet of letter paper.

"Chesney ain't so bad after all," suggested Ted.

But Vance, after his first amazement, unfolded the note. It was typewritten, unsigned, and read as follows:

"Some of the guests at the hotel, who enjoyed your performance last night, feel that you haven't been fairly treated. These guests beg to be permitted to hand you the enclosed amount, taken up by subscription. As this comes from persons well able to spare the money, we beg that you will accept it in silence, and believe that it comes from us in the spirit of live-and-let-live. Kindly say nothing about this money before leaving the hotel."

"Oh, oh, oh!" choked Vance.

"Say!" chattered Ted Roberts. "There are some white people in the world!"

"It beats me!" murmured Dave Thayer.

For once Sam Slick could not talk. A big tear glistened in either eye of that old, storm-tossed vaudeville actor.

"We can go now, and we can do business," quivered Vance.

"For one thing," proposed Dave, "we can afford a carriage to take you to the depot, Vance."

"Do you think I'm going to blow the first money on myself?" demanded the young manager. "I'll walk, and have three pairs of arms to lean on, if I need. Fellows, this place ain't any too pleasant for me now? Shall we start?"

That idea caught. Sam Slick thrust a hand under Vance's left shoulder.

"Forward, march!" cheered Ted. "All except for you,

Vance, old fellow, we're a heap better off than we were yesterday. We can buy grub to-day, and rent a bed to sleep in."

All except our hero felt highly cheerful as they took the shortest cut across the hotel grounds to the road.

They passed but few of the guests, none of whom spoke. Out on the dusty road they went, toward the village, and, after a while, the hotel was far to the rear.

"Why, here comes Miss Chesney," announced Dave, looking down the road.

May was driving slowly toward them, alone, in a pony cart.

"Fellows," begged Vance, "will you leave me alone here for a few moments? I want to see if she believes the disgraceful charge against me?"

"She don't!" uttered Sam. "If she did, she wouldn't be any good."

Jumping over the wall, the other three made off.

Vance felt almost dizzy as he waited there under the shade of a big tree.

May Chesney, of course, had seen our hero.

She was turning red and white in turn, and trembling not a little, as she drove up.

"Miss May!" appealed Vance.

"Good-morning. You are better to-day, I hope?" she said, very quietly.

"Yes, Miss May, thank you. But that isn't what I want to say—what I have to say! You don't—you can't—believe what they tried to make out against me last night?"

"I-I certainly don't want to," she faltered.

Then she caught sight of the tears welling to Vance's eyes just before he bravely dashed them off.

"I don't believe anything of the sort. It's foolish, atrocious, absurd. You're good—I know that," she cried, rather brokenly.

"Thank you," said Vance, humbly. "It's all right now. I won't ask you to say anything more than that now. But one of these days, if I live, I'll show you that there's a lot of decent stuff in me. Will you shake hands?"

Quiveringly, May put out her slim, little hand.

Vance took it, pressed it gently—then, reddening, shyly kissed it.

"Thank you—good-by, Miss May. You shall hear from me. one of these days—and you won't be sorry to hear!"

CHAPTER V.

ON THE ROAD IN EARNEST.

"This seems like old times—out with a company where the ghost walks!" announced Sam Slick, rubbing his shins with satisfaction.

In theatrical slang, "the ghost walks" when salaries are paid and prosperity pervades the company.

They sat in Vance's room, in one of the very small hotels at Clear Beach, twenty miles below Chesney's hotel.

It was the afternoon of the same day, but a big change had come over We, Us & Co.

Out of the funds on hand Vance had insisted on buying each one a tidy suit of clothes, linen, shoes and a new hat.

The company really looked half-way prosperous, now, for our hero had also handed to each ten dollars "on account of salary."

Though the hotel was a very plain little one, it was at least a house in which to live, and where food was served at meal-times.

It was Saturday, and Vance already was full of business.

"There are four large hotels here," he explained to the others. "It will be hard lines if we can't get something doing with one of 'em. This afternoon I shall hustle around—"

"On that wounded leg?" asked Dave, quietly.

"On this wounded leg," nodded Dalton, cheerily, though now and then the wound made him wince with pain. "One of you can go with me. But these are bigger hotels than Chesney's. I wish we had a larger company. It seems like cheek to go around with three performers and ask decent money. I suppose what we need is a woman's face or two in the show. We lack in attractiveness, eh, fellows?"

Before any one could reply, there came a knock at the

A waiter handed in a card.

"The Delavan Sisters—Clara and Flossie. Refined song and dance and sketches," read Vance aloud.

"What?" whooped Sam Slick, jumping up. "Say that again!"

"You know them?" asked Vance.

"Know them? I do. And they're all to the good. The real thing in girls—young, pretty, refined, good people on the stage, and not a bit of the old rounder about them," cried Sam, with more enthusiasm than the boys had believed him capable of.

Then, turning to the waiter, Sam ordered:

"Ask them to come in."

Within two minutes the Delavan sisters entered:

All that Sam had said about their good looks and modest manners was at once made plain. They were genuinely pretty girls, and accompanied by their mother, a comelylooking, middle-aged woman.

"We saw your name on the register, Mr. Slick," began Flossie, as soon as the actor had made the introductions and the ladies had been seated. "Then we heard there was a company here."

"You see the whole company," laughed Vance.

"But you're playing?" asked Clara.

"We hope to, if that's the same thing," smiled the young manager.

"We—we are out of an engagement, at present," broke in Mrs. Delavan. "Summer engagements are poor, you know, Mr. Dalton. We—we thought you might have something to offer us."

Vance fairly jumped at this chance to add such attractive voung faces to the show.

But he went about it cautiously. The instinct of the real manager was coming to the surface in him.

He learned that Mrs. Delavan always traveled with the girls, and that she usually served as pianist for the show.

Within ten minutes Vance had engaged the three at a total of thirty dollars a week and board and traveling expenses.

These were "summer prices," with which the Delavans seemed entirely satisfied.

"I've got a raft of good old sketches in my head," glowed Sam, with honest satisfaction. "And I guess you girls are up in a good many of the same sketches. Why, we can put on a real sketch when we've six people for the cast."

"Seven, I guess, if you need me," laughed Vance.

The Delavans, who had been wondering where the next engagement was coming from, were soon in high spirits.

But Mrs. Delavan was cautious.

Many times before this she had encountered managers, especially summer managers, who had more hopes than cash.

"Can you advance us something on the first week's money?" she hinted.

"Half of the money will do, won't it?" asked Vance, producing what was left of his roll.

It was padded with a good many one-dollar bills in the middle, and looked good.

The Delavans looked happier than ever.

As for Vance, he was jubilant. He had wanted pretty faces in his show, and now he had them.

But soon he began to wonder if their stage work would be up to their looks.

"You have good costumes?" he asked. "And the work is as good as you say?"

"Take my word for it," broke in Sam.

"No. Dalton's right," spoke Mrs. Delavan. "See here, I can get the landlord's private parlor. There's a piano there. In twenty minutes, gentlemen."

Left to themselves, the men of We, Us & Co. went through the dumb show of hugging themselves as soon as they were left alone.

"We've got a real show now," Vance proclaimed. "Lord, with such a company I've either got to get a few dates, or resign."

"You've got to get dates, or you'll be shy with the cash on the very first salary day," spoke Dave, soberly.

"Lord, we couldn't disappoint the girls about their tiny salaries," gasped Ted. "Ain't they bright, though? Floss, especially."

"'Floss,' eh?" chuckled Vance.

Ted reddened.

"Miss Clara is the prettier one," observed Dave Thayer, quietly.

"Good thing you boys won't quarrel," grinned Sam.
"But say, you want to understand one thing. Those girls are as good as they seem, and there ain't a bit of mash about 'em. Mrs. Delavan is a regular old dragon, too, where her girls are concerned."

"Who's talking of trying to mash?" demanded Ted, reddening. "All I said was, what nice girls they are."

A little later they went down to the landlord's parlor.

Mrs. Delavan had been more than as good as her word. The girls were in costume. Short-skirted and with their dancing shoes on, with their hair down and rippling coquettishly over their gleaming shoulders, with just a touch of stage make-up on their cheeks, they looked deliciously, bewitchingly pretty.

Ted and Dave could hardly look away from these attractive girls.

Vance, with the remembrance of May Chesney strong in his mind, felt only a manager's enthusiasm at having such bewitching sprites in his show.

The girls danced and sang, Mrs. Delavan accompanying them on the piano.

Little as Vance really knew of vaudeville work, he felt sure that these girls would double the value of his show.

"We'll work those old sketches up to-night," Sam declared.

"And I'll work up an engagement," Vance announced.
"I'm a lobster if I don't land business right here at Clear Beach."

"Why, the Elsinore Hotel has a building that it uses for a dance hall and theatre," suggested Clara. "That ought to be the place to do something."

"How many will the house hold?" demanded Vance, who was learning fast.

"Seats five hundred," Clara answered.

"Then there'll be something doing there. Dave, do you want to come along?"

Dave didn't really want to go, but he managed to hide his reluctance.

Within half an hour our hero had succeeded in talking to Ransom, the manager at the Elsinore.

"Show?" sniffed Ransom. "We've had barnstormers to burn here, this season and last!"

"Time to have a real show like ours, then," chirped Vance.

"Oh, that's the way all the managers talk," smiled Ransom. "And as for you, young man, do you suppose I expect a good show to be managed by such a youngster as you are —not a day over seventeen or eighteen."

"Going on twenty-three," corrected Dalton, though he took pains not to say how far below twenty-three his age was. He was only seventeen, and it would take time to outgrow that age.

"If you'll light up one end of your pavilion this evening," proposed Vance, "and give us a little attention, you'll wind up by booking us for Monday."

"Monday?" laughed Ransom, out loud. "There'll be nothing doing for you in this town, Monday. Why, lad, there's going to be a circus here Monday afternoon and evening. What chance do you suppose any vaudeville show would have against a circus?"

"Just the kind of chance we want!" proclaimed Vance, on the spur of the moment. "Mr. Ransom, we'll show you what kind of a vaudeville we run by filling your pavilion on Monday night. We'll beat the circus out. The

circus'll get the people who can't get into your pavilion—that's all."

"Sounds good," smiled Ransom, amused.

"But I'll make good," vaunted Dalton.

"Take you up on that," laughed the hotel manager. "See here, Dalton, I'll talk a week's engagement here, on the understanding that I can cancel your show if you don't have a good house Monday night. If you can beat the circus out your show will be good enough for me to make some money out of it."

"I'll beat the circus out," promised Vance, valiantly, though he had not the remotest idea how it was to be done.

Ransom was still more than doubtful. But he finally agreed that, if We, Us & Co. could get a good house on the circus night, then a week's engagement should follow at three hundred dollars.

"And board for the company," put in Vance.

"Oh, hold on there!" cried Ransom.

"That's always our terms," Vance assured him. "Now, see here, Mr. Ransom, we don't have to have the best rooms in your house. Almost any old rooms will do, and we ain't swell eaters, you know. You can feed us in one of our rooms."

"When will you come—Tuesday morning, after you've made your hit?" demanded Mr. Ransom, thoughtfully.

"Why, no; we'll move in to-morrow morning, of course," Vance retorted, promptly.

Ransom was decidedly inclined to argue, and even to throw the whole thing over, but Vance broke in:

"Mr. Ransom, business is business. We always get our board free on these summer engagements. We'll move in to-morrow morning. But if we don't make such a hit on Monday night that you want us for the week, then we won't charge you a cent for the Monday night show—the show against the circus. Now, we couldn't be fairer than that, could we?"

Ransom at last saw it that way, and agreed. More than that, he put the agreement in writing, and he and Vance signed.

"Gracious! I didn't believe you could possibly put the thing through like that," sighed Dave, happily, when they were outside of the hotel.

"I didn't put anything through but a bluff," Vance declared, soberly. "Now, I've got the real, awful business on my hands."

"What?"

"Somehow—and I haven't a blessed idea how it's to be done—I've got to beat out that circus!"

If he didn't do that, We, Us & Co. would be on the rocks!

CHAPTER VI.

BEATING OUT A CIRCUS.

There wasn't exactly undivided joy in the company when Vance got back to the little hotel and told of the contract he had made with the manager of the Elsinore.

"I hope your wad's good and big," observed Mrs. Delavan, grimly.

"Now, see here," Vance broke in, "don't you folks go to doing my worrying for me. It's up to me to get the business end through."

"Can you do it, in this case?" Flossie inquired.

"Sure thing!" Vance replied, cheerily. "Now, see here, it's a fine night on the beach. Suppose we all go out for a stroll."

Somehow, out on the beach, Sam Slick was left to do the gallant thing for Mrs. Delavan.

Vance walked between the sisters, with Ted at Flossie's side and Dave at Clara's.

Mrs. Delavan kept her eyes closely on the girls.

"The beach here is lovely for swimming," said Flossie.

"After we get moved to-morrow morning I'm going out for a big, long swim."

"Are you much of a swimmer?" queried Vance.

"I can swim for miles, without stopping."

"And float?"

"Like a cork!"

"Then you're never afraid of yourself in the water?" asked Dalton.

"Why should I be?" Flossie cross-questioned. "I don't believe I could sink."

"How are you on swimming, Ted?" asked the young manager, suddenly.

"As good as any of them, I guess," said Ted, promptly. "I'll show you in the morning."

"No, you won't," Vance contradicted, with sudden energy. "I don't want you going in swimming to-morrow morning, either, Miss Flossie."

"Wh-what's that?" cried Flossie, in astonishment.

"Don't go in swimming, either of you. Don't even let on that you know how to swim," ordered Vance.

"What on earth ails you?" questioned Flossie.

"Oh, there's a great idea seething in my brain!" cried Vance. "It may not be much good, but we've got to try it anyway. It's the one chance that I see to beat out the circus!"

"What's the scheme?" asked both girls, curiously.

"How do I know, when I haven't had time to think it out?" Vance rejoined. "But just give me time. It'll simmer, and then it will boil! Give me time, and I believe I can think out anything!"

The next morning, Sunday, We, Us & Co. moved over to the Elsinore, taking back rooms up on the top floor. They had their meals served there, too, and kept well away from the guests of the hotel.

By this time Vance believed that he had his scheme well worked out.

There wasn't a doctor at the beach. That much our hero had discovered when he tried to find one to dress the wound, which still bothered quite a bit.

Monday morning the circus came to town, and people flocked to see the tents go up.

The beach was almost deserted.

"Whew! But we've got to get that crowd back from the circus," gasped Vance to Dave.

Flossie went out on the water that morning, though not in her bathing suit.

Instead, she rowed out over the water in a small, "tippy" looking whitehall boat.

For some minutes she rowed about, getting further out from shore.

Then a few, who happened to be looking her way, saw the girl rise and turn, as if to step forward into the bow.

Then she swayed, threw out her arms, seemed to be trying to catch herself—and the boat capsized.

"Girl overboard! She'll drown!" shouted several frantic on-lookers.

"Why, that's our star dancer!" gasped Vance, who had been walking on the beach with Roberts. "Oh, Ted!"

But Ted Roberts, throwing off his jacket and kicking off his low shoes, was already rushing out into the water.

As soon as he struck great enough depth, he struck out with lusty strokes.

"Get a boat!" roared one man, but he stood stock-still, staring, his wits gone.

Scores of others were now on the beach, standing as if petrified, or else running up and down the beach appealing to others to "do something."

"Keep cool, all of you!" roared Vance, calmly. "Mr. Roberts is a practical swimmer. If he can't save Miss Delavan, no one can."

Floss, in the meantime, had reappeared above the surface of the water.

She splashed frantically, then shrieked and sank.

For an agonizingly long interval she remained down out of sight, but at last came up.

Now she splashed with more effect, for she did not sink. "She's growing weaker!" sobbed one wealthy woman. "Oh, how long it takes that young man to reach her. She'll drown—surely."

And sink Floss did, for the third time, while Ted, swimming like a good one, was gradually nearing her.

"He'll be too late!" screamed a man, hoarsely, and the little, shuddering groups on the beach waited and wondered.

It was surprising how swiftly the news of the tragedy spread.

The crowd collected rapidly.

"Hurrah!" A hoarse cheer went up as the crowd saw that Ted had reached the girl, who now floated stilly on the water.

Now Roberts started for the shore with her, but he appeared to be exhausted.

In truth, Ted was well done up from his long, hard swim.

Had it not been for the aid which clever Flossie was able to give him without being detected from the shore, that swim back, encumbered by the girl, would have finished him.

"Now, you'll have to get us both in without any more help from me," Floss whispered in his ear.

Ted stuck to the job manfully until he neared the beach. Here, in the shallower water, a dozen bathers ran out to meet them.

"Get her ashore!" quivered Ted. "I'm afraid she's done for. Has any one thought to send for a doctor?"

Some one had thought of that, and had started to telephone the town.

But Dave had appeared on the run, followed by a young man with a medicine case.

He was a "fake" doctor, hired for the occasion by our hero.

"I don't know about saving her," murmured the "fake" doctor, as they laid Floss on the beach and he knelt beside her.

Floss played her part like the true actress.

Her eyes were closed, and she lay motionless, seeming not to breathe.

"Pulse still; heart seems to have stopped beating," announced the "fake" doctor, soberly. "No sign of breathing. We'll see what the drugs will do."

From his medicine case the pretended doctor took a vial of "medicine," some of which he forced between the girl's lips.

Then he chafed her hands, next laid her face downward and tried to work the water out of her.

As Floss hadn't swallowed any, this was naturally a hard job.

"Telephone for an older doctor," murmured some one.

"That will do no good," lied the "fake," calmly. "I'm a physician in the United States Life Saving Service, and if I can't bring this young lady through no one else can."

Yet he worked over shamming Floss for the next half hour, while the on-looking throng grew more and more solemn, and many of the women, unable to look on at this scene of "death," went shudderingly away.

Nevertheless, the crowd grew. The road from the village seemed suddenly alive with people.

Vance watched anxiously, afraid a real doctor would show up in the swarming, eager crowd.

"It's no use," murmured the "fake" doctor, looking up at last. "The young lady is as dead as she ever will be!"

"Don't say that!" choked Ted, gulping as he looked down at the "still, white" face.

It was white enough, for Floss had naturally little color. "Poor girl," sobbed Vance. "So young and beautiful!

And the world has seldom seen her equal as a dancer!"

There were real tears in his eyes, too, for that young rascal wiped his eyes with a handkerchief on which sliced onion had been rubbed.

Mrs. Delavan and Clara stood by, seemingly too stunned to speak.

"What do you want done with the remains?" asked the "fake" doctor, gently, as he looked up.

"Wait a minute!" cried a hoarse voice.

It was Sam Slick, who hurriedly pushed his way through the densely packed crowd.

"What's the matter with the girl?" he demanded.

"Drowned!"

"Doctor can't save her!"

Sam threw himself on his knees beside the still girl. He pried open her eyelids, then looked up at the "doctor."

"Why don't you bring this girl to?" Sam demanded.

"It's impossible," declared the "fake." "She's done for."

"You lobster!" roared Sam, contemptuously.

"Oh, very well," sniffed the "fake." "If you can bring her back to life where medical science has failed, you're welcome."

"Bear a hand here," ordered Sam, and Vance, Dave and Ted sprang to aid him.

They turned her over, face downward, once more.

Rapidly Sam began to rub his heavy hands down along her spine.

In the stillness a faint gasp came from the girl.

"No life, eh?" snorted Sam. "I'll show you; you medical lobster!"

Two or three vigorous thumps in the spine Sam gave Floss, and then she cried out.

While the by-standers looked on dumbfounded, Sam had her sitting up.

Floss, her eyes open at last, looked around her dumbly, wonderingly.

"Now, I guess you can get up and walk, Miss Delavan," Sam suggested, as he and Ted raised her to her feet.

What a deafening cheer went up as Floss stepped off, thus supported!

"Doctor," sneered Sam, over his shoulder, "you'd better quit the beach and stick to doctoring kittens."

The "fake" medical man soon vanished. But the crowd paid little heed to him, preferring to follow in the wake of artful Floss, who appeared to be gaining strength at every step.

Floss did not keep up the walking long enough to spoil the interest of the crowd. She turned toward the veranda of the hotel.

Laughingly declaring that she did not mind wet garments, and that they were drying rapidly, anyway, she seated herself, while the crowd gathered around.

A good talker, Floss soon had them all interested.

Then Sam was called upon to describe how he had managed to bring her to.

But on this head Sam preferred to remain mysterious, merely observing that he knew a few things that he had learned from Hindu priests in India.

A real doctor arrived. He was as much interested as any one, and tried to draw Slick out, but without avail.

When Floss finally started for her room, she was followed by the cheers of five hundred people, every one of whom was determined to see her dance that evening.

"I guess we've caught the crowd all right," chuckled Vance, as he and Dave met in their room.

"If the interest doesn't die out," Dave replied, thoughtfully.

"Oh, it won't," laughed Vance. "There are two correspondents for the city papers over in the village. I've telephoned to them, and Sam and Floss will be interviewed on the hotel veranda. Ransom won't kick, for he'll sell a hundred extra dinners to-day."

And so it turned out.

All day, at this dull beach, the interest in Flossie Delavan's "adventure" was kept at the boiling point.

Vance stood at the door of the pavilion that evening, watching a crowd go in that filled the place to suffocation.

"The circus will feel this," whispered Mr. Ransom, delightedly. "Dalton, that was really a mighty lucky accident to-day."

"Very lucky," retorted Vance, drily.

"Why, you young rascal, you don't mean that was all a put-up job?" murmured Ransom, opening his eyes.

"What I do mean," returned Vance, a twinkle in his eyes, "is that all our methods are strictly up to date. We can even beat out a circus."

"Good Lord! You sure have to-night!" uttered the hotel manager.

"So that we're sure of that week's engagement at three hundred dollars?"

"The engagement is yours," smiled Ransom. "And I beg your pardon for calling you a kid manager. "You're the real thing, Dalton. You must have been born in the business."

The week, so well begun, proved a prosperous one for the hotel as well as for the company. Flossie and Clara greatly strengthened the show. Dave added "second sight" and some other features to his sleight of hand and ventriloquism. Ted's songs caught on, and Sam Slick's crazy comedy hits kept the audience in a roar.

Then there was the "sketch," which lasted more than half an hour.

Altogether, Vance Dalton was justly proud of his show. And, while the week was on, Dalton, by side trips, had arranged for a week of night-stands at small summer theatres for the coming week.

Saturday night found our hero with nearly four hundred dollars in his pocket.

The next day was to be pay-day.

Vance, with the baggage loaded on to a wagon, went down to the local depot.

There, after buying the tickets, he seated himself on Flossie's trunk to await the arrival of the company, which was to leave town on the midnight train.

Vance, all alone at the depot, save for the station agent inside, felt happy as he waited.

Once his hand traveled up against an inside pocket in which a very plump "wad" of bills rested.

"Oh, this is great! I can't believe it all yet," he murmured, happily. "We're really on the road, and doing well! I'm manager, and I've got a good company, if I did pick it up hap-hazard."

In the darkness, as he sat under one of the depot lights, he caught sight of a figure flitting by at the other end of the platform.

Though Vance did not recognize the man, it was Fred

Griscomb, his former employer.

"That troublesome kid!" muttered Griscomb, vengefully, as he disappeared around the end of the station building. "I suppose he thinks I've forgotten him. But he can't lose me—he can't get away from me. And now—if he has the company's funds with him we'll cook up some trouble for him that will pay him back for meddling with me. It's safer than shooting him, too."

Griscomb waited until a low hiss from the bushes beyond drew his attention.

Then swiftly, stealthily, he crossed the road to the bushes.

Two rough-looking men awaited him there.

"It's all right. The kid's there, but you've got to hustle," whispered Fred Griscomb. "See here, if he has that wad about him, be sure you get it! As for the kid himself—well, you know what I want done to him!"

"We know," nodded one of the men.

"Then hustle-before any one else shows up!"

Griscomb faded into the darkness beyond.

His two men walked slowly toward the platform.

Down at the other end they came upon Vance, sitting on the trunk.

Dalton, remembering the roll of bills he carried, eyed the men with some misgivings.

"They don't look like good company," he muttered, uneasily, to himself. "I reckon I'll wait inside."

He rose and tried to pass them.

"Where are ye going, kid?" demanded one of the men.

"Inside," answered Vance, briefly.

"Wait a minute! I want to ask ye-"

Grip! The other rascal had slipped behind Vance. One of the brute's arms closed around the boy's throat, choking him and forcing his head far back.

"Kill him, if he hollers!" gruffed the other fellow.

Vance tried to call out, but he was being strangled so that his head swam. He was powerless in that strong clutch.

"Here's his wad!" uttered the brute in front, finding the money.

Vance Dalton was just conscious enough to realize, with a thrill of horror, that the money had been taken from him.

Smash! A heavy fist landed between his eyes.

All went black before him. As the fellow behind let go Vance Dalton slipped to the platform, unconscious.

"Sure job of him!" growled the one who had gripped the boy from behind. "You know the boss's orders."

Then blows rained on the unconscious boy. Vance knew nothing of what was happening.

Then, hearing steps, the two brutes slipped off in the night with every dollar belonging to We, Us & Co.

CHAPTER VII.

AN "ANGEL" OF FIRE.

"Here's the baggage," called Dave Thayer, who was in advance of the party.

"Kid manager tired out, eh?" demanded Sam Slick, coming forward. "Lord, but it's careless of him to sleep that way, with the company's boodle on him."

"Sleep nothing!" gasped Dave Thayer. "Look at that

bloody nose!"

With a rush the company came forward.

"Done up," announced Sam, briefly, as he knelt beside our unconscious hero.

"Look for his roll, then! See if that's safe?" cried Mrs. Delavan.

"What's the use, ma'am?" Sam asked drily. "Do you s'pose any one did him up like this for the mere fun of the thing?"

"Robbed?" shrieked Mrs. Delavan.

"That's the size of it, ma'am."

"But our salaries? The next stand?" faltered the woman.

"We'll think of that, when we get our manager back to earth," Sam retorted drily. "Clara, run and get some water."

Within five minutes they had Vance Dalton back to consciousness.

His first move was to clutch anxiously at the pocket where his money had been.

"You needn't take the trouble to look for the roll, old man," Sam advised. "The Committee on Swipe has attended to you."

"The scoundrels!" quivered Vance. "One of them grabbed me from behind."

"That's the way the swipe sketch is always done," said Sam, calmly.

"But I must have the tickets left," faltered Dalton, as he reached for another pocket. "Thunder, no! They're gone, too!"

"Sure, of course!" nodded Slick.

"And my father's watch? No; I've got that still."

"The Committee was in a hurry, then," drawled Slick.
"Usually they don't overlook anything."

"But, good heavens! I can't pay the salaries now," moaned Vance.

"You're new at theatrical management," spoke Sam, cheerily, "or you wouldn't let a little thing like that worry you."

"But we haven't even the money to get to the next stand," quiverd Dalton.

"We've got until Monday night to walk," retorted Sam.

"It's the end of the company," spoke Mrs. Delavan, tragically.

"I'm afraid it is," Vance nodded, with a great, gulping sigh.

"Can't I help?" eagerly proposed a young man, coming forward out of the shadows.

It was Mr. Plummer Chadsby, a young college student. Right after the beach incident Chadsby had made Flossie's acquaintance, to Ted's great disgust, and there the young student had hung.

He was plainly heels over head in love with pretty Flossie.

He stuck to her at every chance, meekly, humbly adoring, yet so respectful about it, that it was hard to order him away.

Mrs. Delavan had hoped to lose him at the depot tonight. Flossie had hoped the same thing.

"I've got a little money," suggested Chadsby, eagerly. "It isn't much, but it's eighty-five dollars. Now, see here, Mr. Dalton, if I put that in, will you give me a share in the management of the company?"

This offered a possible way out of their troubles.

It also offered what Chadsby wildly desired—a chance to travel in the company with charming Flossie Delavan.

The poor student was trembling, in fact, with eagerness over this new and delightful prospect.

Vance hesitated, not knowing what to say.

"You'll speak a good word for my idea, won't you, Mrs. Delawan?" begged Chadsby.

Mrs. Delavan did not know what to say, except that she utterly disliked the idea of this love-sick young idiot trailing along after her daughter.

"You'll have to talk to the manager," she said, shortly.

"Why, Mr. Dalton, you'll let me buy a share in the company, won't you?" appealed the student-lover.

"I'll have to think about it," Vance answered, slowly.

Then, turning, our hero led Slick aside.

"What do you make of the fellow?" asked Dalton.

"Oh, it's an old thing for a company to have an 'angel,' "Slick returned grimly. "The 'angel' is always struck on some woman in the company, and puts up his cash in order to keep near the fair one. But an eighty-five-dollar 'angel' is about the smallest-fry 'angel' I ever heard of."

"The money would get us to the next stand," replied Vance, slowly. "I think I know about how to talk to him now, Sam."

So, going back to young Mr. Plummer Chadsby, our hero announced:

"Mr. Chadsby, I am not prepared to sell you a share in the company, until we've traveled together and found out what there is in you. But if you want to advance your eighty-five dollars we'll take you along and give you a chance to show what you're good for. Then later on, I'll either name a price for a half interest in the company, or I'll pay you back your eighty-five dollars."

"Why, you couldn't be fairer than that!" cried the delighted young lover. "Mr. Dalton, I'll prove my worth to you! You can look upon me as a fixture in the company."

"If you're a fixture, I'll find a way to take you down!" gritted Ted Roberts, under his breath.

Chadsby handed over his money. Vance bought new tickets. The company got away, reaching the next show town, Clematis, early Sunday morning.

They went direct to a small hotel, for here We, Us & Co. were to play in a small but regular theatre.

Chadsby went the way of all "angels" by pinning himself at the side of Flossie every chance he got.

The show had been well advertised by the local manager. Monday night the house proved to be well-filled.

Here there was a regular orchestra, so Mrs. Delavan had the night off. But she was in the dressing rooms, trying vigilantly to keep the eager Chadsby away from Flossie.

"I'll fix him," promised Sam. He took Chadsby to the rear of the stage, setting him at work under the local scene-shifter.

"No smoking allowed back here," growled the scene-shifter, and Chadsby reluctantly threw his cigarette away.

As the curtain rang up, Vance, who had been "on the door," watching the taking of tickets, went back on the stage.

Ted was out in front, singing in that sweet, strong voice of his.

Sam was in the wings, watching from the left, and waiting for his turn to go on in a monologue.

Vance took up his position in one of the right entrances. Ted finished his song and came off, amid thundering applause.

In a twinkling he was on again, beginning a ballad.

"What's that smoke?" wondered Vance, suddenly.

Just in a moment there had come a strong smell of something burning.

Chadsby's cigarette had fallen among inflammable material.

From this one of the scenes behind the drop had caught fire.

The oil in the paint began to burn briskly.

Vance, wondering and uneasy, heard a brisk crackling.

"Fire!" shouted some one in the audience, as a tiny cloud of smoke blew out over the house.

"Escape while you can!" roared some one else.

There was panic in an instant.

That day's papers had been full of the story of a theatre out west in which a fire had cost nearly a score of lives.

Men rose and fought their way to the rear of the house. Women shrieked, then fainted.

Instantly the aisles were jammed.

Even if the fire were put out, it seemed certain that scores would be trampled to death.

Vance had no time to think it out.

He knew only that something must be done swiftly.

Like a flash he bounded out upon the stage, just as the frantic leader of the orchestra tried to clamber up over the footlights.

From the opposite entrance Sam Slick rushed, eager to do something, yet wondering how to allay the panic out front.

"Friends, our fire-eater has a fit of indigestion—that's all!" roared Vance over the tumult.

"Get back—you're no doctor!" bellowed Slick, taking the cue and pushing the frantic leader back.

Coolness in that perilous moment stayed the deadly panic.

"Play something down there, you fellows!" whispered Vance, hoarsely.

Without waiting for the leader, the cornet-player struck up a pretty waltz. The other musicians followed.

Men and women, feeling ashamed of their panic, turned to look toward the stage.

There stood Vance, smiling calmly, while Sam Slick was waltzing in burlesque fashion that brought out first smiles and then roars of laughter.

Slosh! slosh! went water from fire buckets back of the drop.

"Fire's out!" bawled a stage-hand.

"There, you see, friends!" called Vance. "There's no use in losing the finest show on earth after you've paid to see it. I now beg to present Signor Taro, the famous young Italian wizard, who will amaze you for twenty minutes with some of the sleight of hand deceptions that have made him a welcome visitor to every court in Europe."

Promptly the drop rose, disclosing Dave in his dress suit, ready to perform the first trick on his list.

Vance had time to get behind the scenes now to learn more about the fire.

Chadsby was there, scared to death, while a stage-hand told how the tossed-away cigarette had come near costing many lives.

"Oh, believe me, I'm sorry," chattered the frightened

young student.

"Sorry?" snorted Vance. "You've every right to be. I don't want to say more to you until I've cooled down a bit."

"But really, I assure you, Mr. Dalton, it shall never happen again."

"It won't happen again," Vance uttered grimly to himself, "after I've raised some money to pay back to you."

But Chadsby, only half-suspecting the fate that was in store for him, slid away.

He had just caught sight of Flossie Delavan stepping on to the stage, made up for her "turn," and looking as delightfully pretty as it is possible for a girl to look.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GREAT WEEK.

Manager Vance Dalton never forgot that week.

Saturday night found him with two hundred and forty dollars to the good.

That was after all expenses had been paid—salaries up to date and all.

It included, also, the handing of a hundred dollars to Mr. Plummer Chadsby in return for his eighty-five.

"Thank you for the loan, Mr. Chadsby," Vance said, as he handed the money over.

"But how about the partnership?" asked the love-sick young student, as they stood out in the lobby of the theatre on this last night of the week. "You know you promised me a partnership."

"Not exactly," Vance denied. "I said we'd try you."

"Haven't I been satisfactory?" pressed the young man, eagerly.

"What have you done, beyond setting a theatre a-fire last Monday night?" Vance demanded.

"Why, I—er—er—I've helped in every way that I possibly could," cried Mr. Chadsby, anxiously.

"You've been very good about carrying Miss Flossie Delavan's satchel for her, if that's what you mean," smiled Vance.

"I—er—I am sure she appreciated that," protested Chadsby.

"Now, see here," retorted Vance, looking the love-sick student straight in the eyes, "I may as well tell you, Chadsby, that you've been making a fool of yourself. That girl is out for business. She's earning her living at her work, and she hasn't any time for followers. We need the Delavan Sisters in this company; the show would be flat without them. Flossie has told me that either you quit the show at once, or she doesn't go on with us. Is that plain enough?"

Poor Chadsby looked utterly crushed.

"I-I can't believe it," he moaned.

"Then Mrs. Delavan will set you straight, if you want to see her," hinted Vance.

"See her?" gasped the student.

All the week that excellent but sharp-tongued woman had been giving him black looks.

"Just take a hint," spoke Vance, softly. "You look foolish, Chadsby, following a pretty stage girl around the country. "There's nothing in it for you, either, for you can't win a wife out of the Delavan family."

"I—I had hoped to," replied Chadsby, with a catch in his breath.

"Let me tell you something," proposed Dalton. "If Flossie Delavan isn't already engaged to Ted Roberts, she's just as good as engaged. It is all understood between them."

"You-you don't mean it?" gasped the poor fellow.

"I do, though. Now, don't you think, Chadsby, the best thing you can do is to slip quietly away and forget We, Us & Co.?"

"But I must see Flossie—just a few words!"

"She'll see you only in the presence of Ted Roberts."

"Then I'll go, now," sighed Chadsby, sorrowfully.

Pulling himself together he stalked moodily out of the heatre.

That was the last they saw of him—greatly to Flossie's relief, as well as her mother's.

For the following week Vance had, by the greatest good

luck, secured a week's engagement at a summer hotel at Rockport.

Wherever We, Us & Co. had performed at summer hotels the proprietors had found that the presence of the company contributed to the life of the place, and was therefore a profitable feature in keeping guests.

Before that week at Rockport was half over, Vance called Slick, Ted and Dave to one side for a consultation.

"Now, fellows," Vance began, "the summer is half over, and we're doing well. I've been thinking of expanding the business."

"Going to hire more people?" asked Ted.

"Not the way you understand it, Ted. We have people enough now for this company, and we give as good a show as is expected of us. But I mean to hire more people, and to start another company out, if you fellows think it can be done well."

"Two companies?" asked Dave, in surprise.

"Yes. For instance, I had two requests for this week, and two requests from different towns for the services of the company next week. You see, we've started a new idea by providing a low-priced company as a special attraction for a summer resort hotel. It has got so now that I don't have to hustle hard for engagements. Hotel people write me, instead. Now, we could have had two engagements this week and next also. Having only one company we could take only one engagement."

"But have you got the long green to keep two companies moving?" asked Sam Slick, serious for once.

"I've got about two hundred dollars. We'll have three hundred more at the end of the week here. We also have an engagement for next week,' Vance explained. "Now, after paying salaries in this company, and carrying us on to the next stand, I'll have cash enough left to just about start out a second company."

"A number two company, theatrical folks would call it," Sam broke in.

"Thank you. Now, as we can get a date for a second company the next week, the question comes, shall I try it?"

"It's all right if you win," Sam replied slowly. "If you lose, you will be in the soup with both companies, and that may mean the finish of this company, too."

"Of course it's a chance," nodded Vance. "But I've about made up my mind to get a date for the number two company, and to get the company together."

"How will you manage the other company?" Ted inquired.

"You'll manage it for me, old fellow," Vance replied. "And Dave will help you out, for he'll be in number two company with you."

"Oho! And the girls?" Ted asked, thoughtfully.

Vance laughed.

"That's going to be all right, too, for they'll go with the number two company. You see, I want that company as strong as possible, and so you'll all be with it except Sam. I need him for comedian with my number one company, and we'll have to get some other comedian for you,

Ted. I've been corresponding with a theatrical agency in the city, and I can get the extra people needed to join us at once. Summer is the time when most theatrical people are loafing."

"I know all about that!" grunted Sam.

"Then number two company is settled, fellows," Vance announced. "Ted, you'll take your company to Graysmere next week. Three hundred dollars and board for the company is the price we get. You'll have to pay the bills every week, and send the diff. to me. I shall have to spend about all the ready money this week getting number two company in shape."

After that there were many anxious talks.

Vance secured dates for his two companies all right for the week following.

The extra people needed for both companies were also secured, but it was necessary to send the new people money for their fares.

Sunday morning the new people arrived.

The two companies were now made up, and both quietly rehearsed that day at Rockport.

"They're both good shows," Vance decided, "and ought to make money."

Yet it was an anxious day for him. His own first company had promised to do fairly well and to pay a small but sure profit.

His reason for having two companies was his desire to double his profits.

- Yet, with so little capital, if either company failed it would carry the other company down in its financial crash.

"It's a case of double what I've got, or lose everything," Vance soberly admitted to Roberts. "Oh, Ted, you'll try to be the slickest kind of a manager, won't you, old fellow?"

"I sure will," Ted replied, earnestly.

That Sunday afternoon the two new companies separated at the railway depot, going in opposite directions.

On the train, Vance looked over his new number one company.

Sam Slick was the only old friend left.

In this reorganized company, a State-of-Maine Yankee who went by the name of Fortunello, did the magic, sleight of hand, ventriloquism and hypnotism.

Two young Irish boys, Tim and Jack Grogan, did some almost marvelous clog-dancing. Irene Summerfield, a pretty and modest girl, sang ballads and helped in the sketch.

There was a gymnast, who performed wonders on the bar and the slack wire and did a fancy club-swinging act.

There was Jim Jordan, who did both black-face and German comedian work. He was a valuable second to Sam Slick.

There was Herr Kumpf, a thin, sallow-faced little German, who acted as pianist, and who could lead an orchestra when there was one.

Last, but by no means least in her own estimation, was

that very lively and capable young soubrette, Favrine Des- first glass. "But my! What a tough manager he is to boss. quelles.

She wasn't French, but that was no one's business. She had striking yellow hair, a pretty face, and a very comely figure.

Though not more than twenty years old, Favrine had been on the stage some three years.

She was inclined to be flirtatious, and at once set out to make a victim of Manager Vance Dalton, to whom she had taken a violent fancy.

"Why, you look lonesome, all by yourself in this seat," she laughed, coming down the aisle after the train had started.

"You'll excuse me for being lonesome, won't you, Miss Desquelles?" Vance asked, with a smile, as he rose. "But I have several business matters to think over, and I shall have to be by myself for a while."

He stepped out into the aisle, and moved down to another seat, while the members of the company glanced smilingly toward Miss Desquelles.

"Turned me down, did he?" murmured Favrine, under her breath. "I shall have to train him better than that."

Favrine, however, knew her man better than to begin again at once, even if she had fallen in love with him.

Number one company arrived at Saysville late that afternoon and went at once to the Cliffmere Hotel, where the week's engagement was.

The members of the company were shown to their rooms, on the top floor of the hotel, and there Favrine, after getting her trunk open, picked out her most fetching gown for the evening.

But she had wasted her time. As soon as supper was over, Vance, Sam and Fortunello went over to the pavilion, where they worked hard for hours getting the stage to rights for their show.

The next morning that impulsive young woman made her way to the pavilion, where she found Vance watching while Fortunelle sat up his sleight of hand table.

She moved at once to our hero's side.

"Let me show you how that will go better, Fortunello," interrupted Vance, spring up on to the stage.

He remained there after that, but presently Favrine reached his side.

"Say, you're trying to give me the throw-down," she murmured, plaintively, in Dalton's ear.

"Some mistake," answered Vance, though he smiled. "I never wrestle-with girls."

"Say, I want you to like me," Miss Desquelles murmured in a tone intended only for his ear.

"Then make a great hit in the show, and I will," Vance promised at once, in his business-like way.

He moved off again, and soon left the pavilion.

Favrine, in her disappointment, went to her room. Ringing, she ordered a bottle of mineral water.

When that came she sat down to think.

"He's only a kid," she reflected, as she sipped at the swered, with a little less ice in her voice.

Is there anything wrong with me?"

Rising, she looked in the glass at her really handsome face. She nodded approvingly as she looked over the reflection of the comely lines of her young figure.

"He ought to like me," she muttered, then sat down again with her mineral water. "I'd like to marry a fellow like him, for he is bound to make his mark in the world.

When Favrine Desquelles took to getting mad she was likely to prove a powder mine!

CHAPTER IX.

THE DROP FOR LIFE!

Vance Dalton came out upon the hotel veranda looking his most prosperous.

He wore the nattiest suit he had ever owned, bought out of recent profits, for he believed that it was always best for a theatrical man, or even a boyish manager, to show himself at his best.

As Vance stood there on the hotel veranda, just past the entrance, he noted, through a corner of his eye, that an automobile had just rolled up.

He saw also that a young woman had alighted, alone, and that she was coming up the steps.

Then the young woman started to pass him, not looking his way either.

Vance stepped quickly back, and, as he did so, he turned. Then he gasped, feeling next a cold chill and then a hot flush.

"May!" he uttered.

The young woman seemed hardly less startled.

But at the mention of her Christian name she drew herself up stiffly.

"Aren't you just a trifle familiar?" she asked, coldly.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Chesney! You can't realize how sorry I am," Vance cried, impulsively. wouldn't offend you-you of all persons in the world!"

May Chesney still looked at him with distant displeasure.

Very perfect, very dainty, the thoroughbred little aristocrat she looked as she stood there, stiff and forbidding.

"Your apology is sufficient," she replied, coolly. "Goodmorning, Mr.-

She hesitated slightly, as if she could not recall his

That hurt the boy worse than anything else could have done, but it also brought out his dignity.

"If you've forgotten my name, Miss Chesney, it's a matter of no consequence," he replied, speaking coolly himself now. "But at least I am certain that you have not forgotten my face. Our other meeting was such a strange one, and resulted in such injustice to me—through no fault of yours—that I had hoped you would be glad to hear how well I am doing nowadays."

"If you are prospering, I am glad to hear it," May an-

"Won't you let me tell you how I am getting along?" Vance asked.

"Yes; if you wish to tell me."

"Won't you sit here a few moments, Miss Chesney?" he invited, pointing to a settee.

"Why, we can stand just as well, can't we, Mr. Dalton?"

"Whatever you wish is just what I want most to do," Vance replied, quickly.

"But about your business-?"

"It's the same old business," nodded Vance. "Yet from a very hard-up condition we've come to where we are having regular engagements. I am the manager, you know, and the profits are my own."

"I am sure I hope the profits are very large, Mr. Dalton."

"Not tremendous," smiled Vance, "but very comfortable. I have done well enough, anyway, so that this week my number two company is out."

"You must engage quite a number of people now, Mr.

Dalton."

"Quite a few, Miss Chesney."

"And several—er—women?"

"Oh, yes; we have two with this company, and three with the other."

"Stage women are not always as nice as they might be, are they?" May asked, with just a trace of disdain.

"Ours are hard-working, steady young women," Vance defended, with prompt gallantry for his own feminine people.

"I am very glad to hear that," May replied. "I have heard that there is a good deal of flirting in theatrical companies, and of course that would take a young man's mind off of business."

"The young women I employ don't get my mind off my business any," Vance denied, laughingly. "To change the subject just a bit, Miss Chesney, do you know why I have been so anxious all along to succeed at something?"

"Of course I don't," she half-smiled.

There was a much more friendly look in her eyes now, which encouraged Vance to go on.

"Miss Chesney, I know very well that our first acquaintance had some features in it that were unlucky for me. But I never have been able to feel that you believed me guilty of being in Griscomb's employ on that awful night. I have been certain that, in your heart, you knew that I rushed in to help you, not that scoundrel."

"If it will give you any pleasure to know that I didn't think you such a wretch, then the pleasure is yours," she answered softly.

She was smiling now, and seemed altogether more friendly.

"Miss Chesney," murmured the boy, "if I don't do another real thing in life, I mean to earn and to keep your good opinion. You don't mind my saying that, do you?"

"How can I object to your saying that you intend always to be a good and honorable man?" May questioned.

"And if I am that, I can have your good opinion?"

"Most certainly, Mr. Dalton."

"Will you be much more kind to me, Miss Chesney, and allow me to write once in a while and tell you how I am getting along?"

"Why-er-er-I--"

"Telegram for Mr. Dalton," sang out a bell-boy, hurrying up with a sealed yellow envelope.

Just at that moment Vance wished with all his heart that telegrams could occasionally travel by freight, but he turned to her with:

"You will excuse my opening this, Miss Chesney?"

"Certainly."

Vance took out and unfolded the telegram. Then, as he read, his head swam!

For this was the message:

"Some scoundrel poured oil on our trunks and set fire on depot platform. Wardrobe, costumes, apparatus gone. Company up a flue! "ROBERTS."

Number two company ruined! Both companies smashed then, probably, for it would take every dollar to meet bills.

But Vance tried to hide the shock the telegram had given him.

May, however, watching his face, thought she saw something wrong there.

"No bad news, I hope," she suggested.

"Nothing of consequence," Vance replied, calmly, though he felt everything turning to ice inside of him.

"I—I thought—you—"

"Oh, I might as well tell you, Miss Chesney," rejoined Dalton, forcing a smile. "I've just got word that my number two company has met ruin. Here's the telegram. You can read for yourself."

"Oh, I'm sorry," cried May, in a voice that rang with sympathy as she read through the telegram.

There were tears in her eyes as well as in her voice, a fact that made Vance feel that ruin could be a very pleasant thing, after all.

She moved as if about to seat herself on the settee, after all, and to invite the boy to a seat beside her.

But just at this point Favrine Desquelles flashed out on the piazza.

She had finished the bottle of mineral water, and now there was danger in her eyes.

"Hello, sweetheart!" she cried, as she rushed up to Vance and threw her plump arms around his neck.

For a moment poor Vance was too staggered to do anything.

As for May Chesney, she leaped to her feet, and then—froze up!

Just one glimpse she took of Favrine, with her yellow hair, her handsome face, and then May Chesney turned on her heel.

Vance, who had broken away from Favrine with an angry snort, sprang after May.

"Miss Chesney-" he began, reaching her side.

"Don't speak to me—don't dare!" flashed May, scornfully, over one shoulder, and then walked on to the end of the veranda and down into the grounds.

As for Vance Dalton, he stood where May had left him. It was as if horror and shame had turned him to stone.

A hand touched him on the shoulder.

"Say, Dalt.," murmured the girl, nervously, "I didn't see her in time—honest I didn't. I hope I didn't spoil a mash!"

"I guess it would be better for me not to try to say anything to you—now," replied Vance, as he shook off her hand and strode away.

Down the graveled path to the street he passed swiftly. Out into the street, and straight back from the sea he hurried on.

Ruined! He believed that his theatrical venture would go up in smoke.

But that was as nothing compared with May Chesney's righteous disgust and indignation.

Where had May gone?

Vance turned, but he did not see her anywhere in the hotel grounds.

So he strode on. He didn't know where he was going, nor did he care.

All that he wanted just now was action—to get away from the late shameful scene. He felt as if he could walk fifty miles without stopping.

For three or four minutes he stumbled on along the road, without the least notion of where his course was taking him.

The sidewalk was shaded by great maples and arching elms.

Here the sun did not beat down upon him fiercely, and the cool shade seemed as soothing as anything could be at that time.

The hotel was far behind.

Vance felt that he would never go back there.

Not even his plain duty to the people of his company had any force with him at that moment.

"Why can't girls like that Desquelles keep to themselves a bit?" he asked himself, savagely. "Just when everything was moving smoothly, she had to thrust herself in! Called me 'sweetheart'! Ugh!"

Vance shook himself savagely.

"Good Lord, look there!" gasped a man, just ahead of him, who stood under the shelter of a great tree.

"What is it?" Vance asked, indifferently.

Nothing could interest him just now.

"Gosh! I b'lieve the auto's running away with that girl!" gasped the man, pointing.

Auto? Girl?

Vance Dalton wheeled about as if suddenly stung.

Then his heart seemed to leap up into his mouth.

For there came the same automobile that he had seen at the hotel.

In it, alone, was May Chesney. Plainly the machine had gotten beyond her control. She was standing up just bethere.

hind the dash-board, shricking, waving her arms and looking as if about to jump to death from the flying car.

Vance took just one look—there was just one thing to do.

Just one thing, and almost absolute certainty of death
from doing it.

Like an electrified ape he scrambled up that tree.

Out on one of the boughs he ran, then dropped and caught with his hands, his eyes toward the onrushing autocar.

There was no time to think or plan—only one chance in a million that he could succeed in the sole plan that his mind had had time to grasp.

Whizz-zz! Almost under the tree was the speeding auto. It wasn't really possible to calculate distances or anything.

At what he hoped might be the right instant Vance Dalton recklessly let himself drop.

Just a second too soon, plainly!

Instead of falling into the car, he fell just before the dasher.

Whump! Struck by that swift-moving car, up into the air he shot, turning a somersault in the certain face of death!

CHAPTER X.

HOT AIR AND COLD SILENCE.

With the wind all jarred out of him, Vance came down—somewhere!

In that first instant he hardly realized where he was.

Then the sense of motion, the note of a girl's changed shrick, told even his dulled mind that something had happened.

Lying on his back, huddled up, the boy opened his eyes. He was lying on his back in the tonneau of the flying

"Gracious!"

With that realization Vance Dalton scrambled to his feet, all unmindful of how sore and bruised he was.

He clutched at the seat dividing them for an instant.

May Chesney, clutching at the seat back from the other side, faced him.

But Vance did not wait to look at her.

Pulling himself together with an effort, he scrambled over into the front compartment of the car.

May Chesney stood in his way.

Gently but firmly he pushed her fairly out of his way, and got a hand on the steering wheel.

The machine responded stiffly, and that told Vance why the auto had not already dashed to ruin against one of the numerous trees or telephone poles.

Still, he could steer the machine, and keep it out of immediate danger.

Now, with one hand on the wheel, with the other he reached for the speed lever.

This did not move readily. Something was out of order there.

"Can you stop us?" sounded May's voice in his ear.

She had dropped into the seat beside him.

"If I can't," he replied, not looking at her, "I can steer us safely, I think, until the gasolene gives out."

But now he found out what ailed the speed lever.

A moment's patient effort, and he brought the great car to a gradual stop.

"Thank heaven—and you!" broke feverishly from the girl's lips.

Then, as if without thinking, she leaped to the ground, staggered to the nearest tree and caught at it.

Vance was after her in a flying leap.

He put one arm around her slim waist now, fearlessly, and steadied her as she swayed.

"Don't faint—there's no danger now," he urged, practically

With a shuddering quiver, May Chesney recovered her grip on herself.

"Thank you," she murmured. "I'm not going to faint. I'm strong again now."

Vauce would have given worlds to keep his arm around her waist, but he felt that her tone was a command to do nothing of the sort.

So he stepped back, standing in front of her, looking eagerly at her pale face.

"You are very brave—fearless, as a man should be," she murmured.

"Then, as a man should be, we won't talk about it," smiled Dalton, rather stiffly. "But how did it all happen?"

"I thought I could run the car alone," she confessed.

That tone told Vance all he needed to know.

May, in her mad haste to get away from the Cliffmere, had looked in vain for her chauffeur, and then had tried to run the car unaided.

"She must care, then!" thought the boy, with a thrill of joy.

May looked up at him, with a queer, cold smile.

"If you'll kindly run the car in to the edge of the sidewalk, and leave it there," she proposed, "I shall be able to walk back to the hotel—alone."

"Why, why can't I drive you back in the car?" Vance asked, wistfully.

"Enter that car again?" questioned the girl, shaking her head. "Oh, no, I couldn't do that—not just yet, anyway."

"Then you'll let me walk back to the hotel with you, won't you?"

"I—I would rather you didn't," she replied, coloring and looking uneasy.

Then, seeing the pained look in his strong, brave young face, she put out one hand, quickly.

"Don't think me ungrateful, Mr. Dalton?" she begged.
"I am grateful, indeed—as grateful as I know how to be.
And my father will see that you are suitably rewarded for the splendid thing that you did."

"Rewarded!" gasped Vance, insulted. "Miss May, what l

do you suppose I care about a reward from your father, when you are the only one on earth who can reward me in the single, sole way that I care about?"

"I-I reward you? How?" she panted.

"By your friendship, Miss Chesney! That's the one thing I care about when everything else is going from me!"

"Oh, no," she replied, shaking her head, smiling coldly and yet showing pain in her sweet eyes, "we couldn't be exactly friends—you and I!"

"And why not?" demanded wounded Vance.

"Why, you see, Mr. Dalton, our interests—and our associates—are so widely different."

"You mean that you don't care to have anything to do with me because I'm a theatrical manager in a small way?" he insisted. "Oh, well, I can throw that business over. There are other ways of earning a living."

"You and I know different kinds of people," she murmured. "You and I don't—don't seem to like the same

kinds of people."

"See here, Miss Chesney," challenged Vance, with blunt directness, "are you thinking of that silly girl in my company—poor, foolish Desquelles, and that idiotic scene at the hotel?"

"Idiotic?" jeered May. "Romantic and pathetic, rather, wasn't it?"

"Oh, hang it all," blurted Vance, impatiently, "you simply don't understand people like that foolish, badly wrought up soubrette."

"You seem to understand them very well," challenged May, coldly. "You seem to be on the best of terms with such people."

"It wasn't my fault," Vance replied, bitterly. Then, with a sudden twinge of shame, and flushing, he cried:

"No, no! I'm not going to hide behind Desquelles's skirts and throw mud on them. She's probably a poor, unhappy girl, at best."

"You sympathize with her?" cried May.

"Much more than I'd dare to blame her," said Vance, promptly.

"Just as I thought," answered the girl, coldly. "Good-morning, Mr. Dalton."

"Then you refuse-"

"I prefer to walk back to the hotel alone."

"May! May!" cried Mr. Chesney, who had come upon them unawares.

He rushed up to her, throwing both arms around her shoulders.

"I just reached the hotel on foot," he cried. "I heard you'd gone away alone in the car, and hurried down to the street. Then a woman told me she had seen you alone, and that the car seemed to be running away with you. Thank goodness you're safe, child. But is this——"

He turned upon our hero, a light of recognition in the man's eyes.

"Vance Dalton, quite at your service," replied the boy, straightening up.

"The car did run away, papa, and he stopped it and

saved me," cried May, a catch in her voice. Then, hurriedly, she told it all.

"Good gracious, boy, you must carry your nerve around in your pocket with you!" gasped Chesney. "Climbed a tree like a flash and dropped into the car as it went by. Good Lord!"

Plainly enough Mr. Chesney was utterly staggered by what he had heard.

Yet, as he got his second wind, he reached out and

grasped the young manager's hand.

"Dalton," he breathed, fervently, "it's quite plain that we misjudged you altogether. At least I did. As for May, she always stood up for you. Yes, you did, child"—as May made a movement to check him. "Well, now, let's all get back into the car and ride back to the hotel for a jolly good pow-wow."

Vance glanced at May, but she looked over his shoulder, then turned as if to follow her father to the auto car.

But she turned, looked back at the crestfallen boy, and said:

"Thank you. Good-by!"

Vance lifted his hat, standing stock-still.

He looked cool; as a matter of fact, he felt frozen.

"Good-by," he repeated.

"Dalton, aren't you coming with us?" called back Chesney, who had halted beside the car. "But of course you are!"

"I—I—" stammered Dalton. "Your daughter—I guess I'd better not."

Mr. Chesney wheeled squarely about, looking from one to the other.

But May had her head high in the air, and from her the man took his cue.

"Oh, all right," sang back Chesney. "But Dalton, you haven't heard quite the last from me. You can look for a pretty handsome check."

"Keep your check!" Vance retorted, crossly. "If you

send me one I'll tear it up."

With that he turned and strode fiercely away.

He heard the toot of the horn as Chesney started the machine toward the hotel.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CRASH OF DISASTER.

As for Vance, he didn't know where he went during the next hour.

He cared much less.

But at last a sense of duty crept in on him.

Though the heavens fell, he had his people to think of.

Just at the moment when it seemed as if the whole fabric of his enterprise must crumble he must be most alert to do all he could to fend off disaster.

So, sighing, he turned and made his way back across the country to the Cliffmere.

"I must tell Sam, and get his advice, if any advice is ney, and then let the boy go.

worth anything at such a time," the young manager reflected.

But the first person he met on the hotel veranda was Mr. Chesney.

"See here, Dalton," demanded that gentleman, curiously, "what's up between you and my daughter?"

"A twenty-foot board fence," returned the boy, smiling

bitterly.

"What's the trouble?"

"I can't explain, sir."

"What ails my girl, then?"

"Nothing at all," said the boy. "She's all right."

"Then what ails you?"

"Oh, I'm in a bit of trouble, I suppose," Vance admitted.

"Not with the-"

Chesney hesitated, awkwardly.

"With the law?" Vance smiled. "Was that what you meant to say?"

"Well, something of that sort," Chesney admitted.

"No; I'm not in the slightest trouble with the law, thank you."

"Then what is it, Dalton?"

"Oh, I don't care to discuss it, sir?"

"Is it a business difficulty?" demanded the man, looking searchingly at the boy, and hauling out a check-book. "If it's a money trouble, Dalton, I can help, and I've got the disposition, too."

"No; it's nothing you can help, sir—thank you."

"But I'd like to understand this all," cried May's father.
"The girl is as stubborn as you are. She won't tell me a blessed word."

"There's no reason why she should, Mr. Chesney."

"Well, of all the fools, you two take the prize!" blurted Chesney.

"You can say that of me, if you want to, sir, but as to Miss May-"

"You're not going to allow me to blame my own child, eh?" demanded Chesney, with a grin.

"I'd rather you didn't sir, when I'm around."

"Then you think May is all right, do you?" quizzed her father.

"All right?" echoed Vance. "Of course she is!"

He looked shocked at the thought of any other idea.

"Oh, well, keep your own notion, then," laughed Chesney. "As I'm the child's father, I know well enough that she can be a little crank, once in a while, just like any other human being."

"I'd rather not listen to that kind of talk, Mr. Chesney," retorted Vance, coloring. "It doesn't sound just respectful, even if you are her father."

Vance turned to go, but Chesney caught him by the shoulders.

"Are you dead sure, Dalton, that I can't help you in any way?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"Let me know, if you change your mind," begged Chesy, and then let the boy go. veranda.

It served as well as any other place to walk and think. Should he change his mind and go to Mr. Chesney?

But the words stuck in his throat, even as he put the question to himself.

"Telegram for Mr. Dalton!" cried a bell-boy.

Vance toré open the envelope.

It was another wire from Ted, who demanded:

"Why no word from you what to do? Can't give show. Company stranded. Can't even get out of town. orders or telegraph money."

"Telegraph money to get number two out of a hole?" smiled the boy, bitterly. "And here I am, after getting that company started, with about eight dollars to pull me through to Saturday!"

Again he caught sight of Mr. Chesney, and once more he felt tempted to speak to that gentleman.

"Oh, I can't do it!" groaned the boy. "It's no use. There are some things that are worse even than death!"

He looked up to find May Chesney coming his way.

She had not seen him yet, and Vance, stepping back, kept out of her sight until she was directly opposite him.

Then, catching sight of our hero, she paled, half turned and looked as if she would flee down the veranda.

"Don't go without a word," begged the boy.

"What is that word to be?" she asked, looking him fully in the eyes and not encouragingly.

"It needn't be anything, unless you're willing to hear," Vance retorted, with a sudden flash of spirit.

"There's nothing that I care to hear," she said, slowly.

"Then you are not obliged to listen, Miss Chesney. Good-morning!"

It was he who turned to go away this time, but May caught at his sleeve.

"Well?" he demanded, turning toward her.

"Let us sit down here—a moment," May invited, nervously ill at ease.

Vance took a seat beside her, waiting now for her to speak.

"You feel that I haven't been wholly just to you?" she began, somewhat unsteadily.

"Would you blame me, if I felt that?" he asked.

"Not wholly. But, Mr. Dalton, we can't hope to understand each other, anyway."

"Why not?"

"We belong to two very different kinds of lives."

"You refer to my business as a theatrical manager?"

"Ye-es, I suppose so."

"Then you don't consider it quite a nice business?"

"Do you?" asked May, opening her eyes rather wide.

"Well, how does it differ importantly from your-I beg pardon, from your father's-business?"

"I don't see that it's necessary to discuss my father's business," May replied, stiffly.

"Why, it gives us a first-rate chance to compare two kinds of business!" cried Vance, now thoroughly aroused

Seeing Chesney step inside, Vance remained on the and recklessly on his own defense. "My vaudeville company supplies people with fun and nonsense to rest their brains with when they're tired out or bored. Your father's hotel supplies soft beds for tired people to rest their bones on. Or his dining-room feeds them when they're hungry."

"I don't care to hear you compare my father's business

with the theatrical," cried May, resentfully.

"Well?" he asked, wickedly. "Shall we stop comparing two kinds of business that don't seem to be-er-any better than they ought to be?"

The pallor in May's face had given way to a deep red

flush.

"You—you have been rather shocking," she quivered.

"All my fault, then, and I suppose I must apologize," cried Vance. "But do you blame me for growing warm when you tell me that we can't be friends simply because our lives are so very different?"

"All I think," answered the girl, coldly, "is that it is time for us to finish our talk for good and all."

"You'll at least give me your hand for an instant, won't you?" the boy questioned.

May hesitated.

Then, with a stiff gesture, she held out her right hand.

It was so icily done that Vance's first idea was to refuse to take her hand.

But he instantly realized how much that would put him in the wrong.

Besides, he honestly wanted to hold that little hand for a second or two, and all the more so if it was to be the last time in his life that he could have that privilege.

"Let me go, won't you, please?" she demanded, suddenly.

"Hush, please," Vance rejoined, still holding her hand. "Look over there."

With his other hand he pointed to two men who were meeting on the lawn just past the end of the veranda.

One of those two men was Frederick Griscomb.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

Vance gazed as if spell-bound.

He recognized not only Griscomb, but also the man who was going forward to meet him.

Griscomb, in a gray morning suit, was just holding out his hand to the other, dressed in blue.

The man in blue was the leader of the pair who had assaulted him at the railway station and left him for dead, after stealing the company's precious funds.

"Have you gone out of your mind?" May demanded, freezingly, as she tried to free her imprisoned hand without creating a scene.

"No," answered Vance, still holding to her, "but I've grown mighty curious."

Then, swiftly, he told her who the man in blue was.

Now Griscomb had retreated behind the corner of the building, drawing Blue-suit after him.

"Come along," whispered Vance, pleadingly.

He still held to her hand.

"Why?" May asked.

"I think you may learn something worth knowing."

"I don't want to go."

"Oh, I wish you would!"

Vance took a step in the desired direction, tugging with gentle insistence at her hand.

"I don't want to go near Griscomb," she quivered.

"Please!"

He had taken another step, and May had to go that far with him simply because she could not get away without risking a scene.

"I'm satisfied, now, that Blue-suit had something to do with burning my other company's trunks," whispered Dalton, frenziedly.

"Do you suppose-" began May, in a cautious whisper.

"How do I know what to suppose? What's the use of supposing, anyway, when a few steps—together—would put us in possession of real facts. Come, please, like a reasonable girl!"

Curiosity conquered.

May no longer refused, but tiptoed along beside him, thrilling at the thought of an adventure in which so much stealth and secrecy were needed.

She forgot to take away her hand, too, or even to try to do it.

So, hand in hand, they went softly down that long veranda.

Griscomb and Blue-suit were talking in low, guarded tones, but the two young, hand-clasped spies could hear every word, as they stood within three feet of the other pair.

"It was a good, complete job, then?" Fred Griscomb

"Complete?" retorted Blue-suit. "It's a wonder the depot didn't catch fire, too, for the end of the platform where the trunks were was blazing fast."

"It must have been risky," hinted Griscomb, curiously, "to oil-soak and fire a pile of theatrical trunks in broad daylight."

"Not so risky," replied Blue-suit, with a low chuckle. "I just stood behind the trunks for a moment, in the course of a stroll by that end of the platform. I made out 'We, Us & Co.' on 'em, and knew I had my people. Then, standing behind the trunks, I threw the oil over 'em. Then I walked the length of the platform again. When I got back that way I stopped to light my cigar, and threw the lighted match down in a pool of oil. Then I walked back to the depot. I was on the other side before any one saw the trunks going, and then it was too late. Every one around rushed toward the trunks—except me. I got off the other way, and no one ever thought to look for me—not until it was too late, anyway."

"Here's your money for the job," went on Griscomb.

"It ain't as good as that job was of knocking the kid on the head and getting off with his roll," murmured Bluesuit. "That roll was good pay in itself."

"I don't feel that I'm even with the boy now," grated Griscomb. "Of course, it was a crazy notion of mine to try to carry Miss Chesney off in the hotel. Still, if I had gotten away with her in the night, she'd have had to marry me before she could go home again. So that might have turned out well, if that confounded kid hadn't butted in just as he did. Sorry'I didn't drill him through when I pulled the trigger on him."

Quivering Vance had heard enough—all he needed to know, and all that he cared to have May hear for herself.

Letting go of her hand, he motioned her to steal back out of earshot.

But May Chesney, the instant she found herself free, took two decided steps forward and down.

"Miss Chesney!" almost shrieked Griscomb, as he saw the girl standing just behind Blue-suit.

Then, in consternation, Griscomb turned as if to flee.

Blue-suit, too, seemed anxious to run a race against his own time.

"Stop!" May commanded. "Follow me—both of you! If you don't—well, you'll find that the law and the telegraph move faster than any scoundrel's legs. Come! Or run away, if you dare to."

Blue-suit, dumbly stricken, looked gaspingly at his employer.

Griscomb's features were of a dull gray, ashen color.

He looked at his dirty-work man and nodded.

"Come," repeated May Chesney, for the third time, and they followed her across the lawn.

"Come, Mr. Dalton," she added. "This is your business!"

May led the way straight to where some rustic seats had been placed under a big, spreading tree.

She seated herself, motioning to Vance, who moved as if in a trance, to sit beside her.

Griscomb started to drop into another seat, but May broke in:

"No, you may stand up-you two criminals."

"What's that?" snarled Griscomb, trying to show fight. "I called you both criminals," May rejoined, crisply.

"I'll prove it, if you wish—in a court of law!"

"That's funny, ain't it?" choked Griscomb, trying to grin.

"If you look at it that way," May gleamed at him. "Anyway, Griscomb, you will realize that Mr. Dalton and I have overheard enough to put you two criminals behind the bars."

"Oh, you'd have to go into court for a thing of that sort," swaggered the fellow. "You'd have lawyers pulling you to pieces, and making you so ashamed you'd wish you'd never been born. And you'd——"

"Griscomb, if you think I can be frightened by any picture of a court scene, you've gone way under in estimating my nerve and courage," the girl went on, cuttingly.

"What do you mean?" stammered the scared one.
"You must make good to Mr. Dalton all the loss you've caused him," May declared, firmly.

"How—how much will settle the bill?" asked Griscomb, eagerly.

"Let me see," she reflected. "You stole three hundred dollars from him. It ought to take five hundred more to make good what his company lost by having their trunks burned. To make sure, we'll say an even thousand for the loss from both outrages."

Griscomb began to look easier.

"For the suffering caused by the bullet wound and being knocked senseless on that other occasion," she went on, coolly, "well—let us see—another thousand would be about right, wouldn't it?"

"Do you suppose I carry a thousand dollars with me?" he demanded, trying to bluster.

"Two thousand," May corrected, coolly.

"It will take time to raise all that money."

"No, it won't," May contradicted, quietly. "I know something about large hotels. You're sure to find that amount on hand in the manager's safe. You're well acquainted here, too, and they know your check is good. As you're a rich scoundrel, you'll have no trouble in raising the money. Well, why don't you start?"

Swearing under his breath, Griscomb turned to move away.

"You know what'll happen if you don't get back promptly," May called warningly after him. "No, Blue-suit, you'll stay here as a pledge of your master's return."

As for Vance, half feeling himself forbidden to speak, he sat like one in a trance, though it was a happy kind of trance.

Then back came Griscomb, with the money. May took it and counted it, then passed it to Vance.

"Two thousand dollars, correct," she smiled. "In consideration, you agree not to prosecute these wretches?"

Then, turning to Griscomb, she uttered:

"Show us what your idea is of fast travel!"

They were gone, and Vance, after putting the money safely away in an inner pocket, turned to the girl, his eyes glowing unspeakably.

"Do you know," he demanded, at last, with an effort, "just now, just past the brink of ruin, I feel the way I did that morning when your father drove We, Us & Co. away. Some mighty noble-hearted people in the hotel, who felt we hadn't been used right, send me a note wrapped around a big-sized purse they'd raised to set us straight. Why, what——"

He stopped suddenly, for the girl had turned her face away, as if to hide something in her eyes.

"May Chesney," he demanded, "was it you who sent me that money?"

She nodded.

"You generous—" he began, but words failed him.

"It wasn't anything," she smiled. "I had an uneasy notion that an injustice might have been done you. I didn't want to be too friendly with you, for I wasn't wholly sure. But at least I could see that you and your people didn't come to want through my doubts. It was very little

to me—I have always had so much pin-money in my purse. So——"

But it was her turn to pause for lack of words.

"I can at least pay that amount back, with my most heartfelt thanks," proposed Vance, reaching for his pocket.

"Not here, please; not now. Later in the day, if you wish," she answered, rising.

"And here I am," cried Vance, self-reproachfully, "so happy that I'm forgetting poor Ted Roberts, in a fearful fix at another place. Miss May, I simply must get to the telegraph station and land about three hundred in poor Ted's troubled hands."

"I can walk down there with you, can't I?" she proposed, smiling.

"Will you?"

That money got off to Ted with very little more delay. Both companies did well after that.

By the time that the Fall season came around Vance Dalton had four vaudeville companies on the road.

Yet the deeper he went into the business, the more impossible it proved for him to stop.

Two years ago he opened his first vaudeville theatre, giving a continuous show all day and evening long.

Already Vance Dalton has a chain of continuous performance vaudeville theatres in several of our large cities.

Right after his first theatre was opened, he asked May Chesney to marry him.

That she did, just after the second theatre was started.

Ted Roberts married Flossie Delavan just after he was appointed manager of one of Vance's theatres.

Dave wedded Clara on the day that he took charge of another of Vance's theatres.

Mrs. Delavan? She's Mrs. Slick, now, and Sam is in Vance's main office.

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